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A BRIGHT BLADE FLASHED IN THE SUNLIGHT. SEVERING ROPE AFTER ROPE.

OR,

The Bounding Buck From Buffalo Wallow.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "LAUGHING LEO," "OLD '49,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"THE DAY WE CELEBRATE."

"FRIENDS and neighbors; ladies and gentlemen:—When I pause to ask you what day is this on which—"

"Chewsday, cunnel, ef my notch-stick ain't all wrong."

"The 21st of April."

Colonel Hugh Falconer bowed his thanks, with just a little more than customary stiffness in his neck. Friendly though the interruption was, it threw him a little off his mental balance, for greatly as he might wish to shine in that direction, he was hardly an accomplished or a fluent orator.

That he had given the matter some study, was

at once evident from his statuesque attitude; literally so, since it had been carefully rehearsed while standing before a print of "The Godlike Daniel." With one hand thrust between the buttons of his close-fitting coat; with the other clasping a roll of paper, gracefully gesticulating, Colonel Hugh Falconer floundered in the mental quicksands, vainly seeking for the clew which that unfortunate if honest response had driven from brain and tongue's end alike.

"The anniversary of San Jacinto!" Soft, sweet, inspiring came the words, barely loud enough to reach the ears of the disconcerted orator. One swift glance in that direction—to meet a bright, encouraging smile from the owner of that musical voice; to see her almost regal head bend slightly, bidding him plainer than words to start afresh with the cue she had given him.

"Ay, the 21st of April, ladies and gentlemen! The day of all days which we, as good and true daughters and sons of Texas, should celebrate! The day which should be marked Independence Day in our calendar, instead of the one which our more-or-less worthy law-makers has seen fit to give us. The anniversary of the day when Glorious Sam testotally chawed up the Greasers and kept old Game-leg to top off with!"

Colonel Hugh Falconer managed to make himself heard even to the end of his exordium, but then paused for breath, smiling blandly at the noisy enthusiasm which his words had aroused in the audience.

Why not? There were a few men within hearing of his voice who had played a sturdy part on that far-away day when proud Santa Ana was humbled in the dust. There were others who had drawn their first breath of life within the confines of the Lone Star State. And many more who had elected that same State as a foster-mother.

There were a few whose sallow skins, whose snaky locks, whose picturesque garb, all proclaimed the people who had fought on the losing side, that memorable day, but no one with closed eyes could have told as much: for if the voices of the true Texans rose louder, those of the Mexicans rung out shriller, more persistently.

Possibly time had wiped out all rancor, so far as they were concerned. Possibly they hardly understood what they were cheering, beyond the one plain fact that it was "the boss" who spoke. Possibly they were casting an anchor to windward, and guarding against a still more offensive outburst of race prejudices.

Be this as it may, Colonel Hugh Falconer was fairly himself again, and with this propitious "send-off," his "few remarks" were extended to cover a full hour of time. And, like all men who find their success far beyond their utmost hopes, he bade fair to work his own discomfiture through that very intoxication.

But there was a watchful eye upon the orator, and when its owner detected signs of growing uneasiness among the congregation, that musical voice came to the colonel's ears in a warning whisper.

"It is long enough, my father," in liquid Spanish. "It is glorious—it is like strong wine to the blood—but these beasts: they have lips for mescal, for pulque! It is not they who can on reason feast—no! A little while they cheer. A little while more, and they will say—what you call *cheese it!*"

Only Colonel Hugh caught the wry grimace which a daintily gloved hand partially disguised, as Nadine Falconer glanced over the crowd of cowboys and herders, of ranch-owners and cattle barons.

She was not mistaken. Jolly, good-natured, indulgent though the majority were bound to be on an occasion like this, they were beginning to show signs of failing attention, eloquent though the speaker was. It would be well enough as a political meeting, or anything of that sort; but on an occasion like this—

"Ain't the gent rubbing it in just a shade too deep, mate?" yawned a huge, bearded stockman to his nearest neighbor.

"For one who married a Greaser?" with just the shadow of a sneer.

"Well, that may make a difference. Needs a heap of talk to bury such a slip out of sight. But Queen Nadine—"

"Is choking him off, or I've forgotten how to read the eyes of a fair woman."

"And such eyes! Why, mate, Greaser or not, I'd—"

The big ranchman stopped short with something like an oath as he was rudely jostled, and one hand mechanically moved toward his hip where hung an ivory-tipped revolver. But it went no further.

The man who had jostled him turned sharply around, staring him full in the face. And a cold, hard voice uttered:

"Did you speak to me, Mr. Browning? If so, please repeat."

"It's you, Nash Whildon?"

"At your service, sir!" more coldly than ever.

"As far as the grove, then," smiled the smaller of the pair, with a cordial smile, pushing between the two men. "It would hardly do to moisten the dust out in the open, eh?"

"Thanks, but I never drink," and Whildon

turned his back upon them without even the ghost of a smile or bow.

Again that strong hand moved silently toward a weapon, but Parker Mandrake gripped the wrist, and forced his big comrade aside.

"None of that, mate!" with a frown as he muttered the warning. "We can't afford to get into a row with the fellow to-day."

"But you saw him—"

"And he heard us! You know what the common talk has it: Whildon's dead-gone on the queen, and so—"

The whisper died away as the two friends passed out of the crowd.

Not even those standing nearest the trio so much as suspected how narrowly they escaped witnessing a tragedy, for one and all were feeling freshened interest in the speaker.

Colonel Hugh was wise enough to feel that Nadine Falconer would hardly whisper such a warning without being sure of her ground, and though he secretly chafed against the necessity of obedience, just as he "was doing himself proud," he promptly accepted the hint.

"But, my good friends, I did not invite you here to-day to listen to a twice-told tale. You are here to enjoy yourselves, each after his own particular fashion. And why not? All work and no play makes Jack a mighty dull boy!"

"One man can't work miracles, but I've done the best I knew how, and for what is lacking, you must accept the good intention instead."

There was a hearty cheer as the colonel bowed low, then stepped down from the improvised rostrum, very well satisfied with himself.

Modestly as he had spoken of his own efforts, he was secretly proud of them, and counted on reaping a generous reward therefrom. For Hugh Falconer was hardly a man to put himself out simply that his neighbors might enjoy themselves. He was of the earth, earthy, and very seldom made a move that was not meant to directly profit himself.

The surprise was quite as complete as he could have wished. Until the evening before, not one of his neighbors had the slightest suspicion of his intentions. Not until couriers bore the invitations far and wide, was there any thought of celebrating San Jacinto Day, dear as that anniversary is to the hearts of all true Texans.

And now, as the older members of the assembly flocked around the colonel, congratulating him on his speech, on the happy thought, and on the grand arrangements which he had made for their comfort and pleasure, the younger contingent scattered to interchange greetings and to "take stock," as it were, of the sports to come, while Nash Whildon, with curiously conflicting emotions written on his handsome face, hastened to the side of Nadine Falconer.

CHAPTER II.

"WERE T'OTHER DEAR CHARMER AWAY."

A FAIR enough magnet, too, this Nadine Falconer, half-slightly though David Brown and his particular crony, Parker Mandrake, had alluded to her.

A Spanish woman, Americanized. Tall, when placed in comparison with others of her own sex, but so perfectly proportioned that the most critical could hardly have wished her different. In the case of a less beautiful woman, her skin would have been called sallow; with her, it combined admirably with her full, red lips, her glorious eyes, large and lustrous, full of slumbering fire that needed but a breath to fan into scorching blaze.

Her lithe, graceful figure was well displayed by the close-fitting riding-habit, the long skirt caught up by loops, now that she was afoot, affording a glimpse of small feet in boots of russet leather, spurred at the heel. On her queenly head a light turban, from which floated feathers, dyed a bright scarlet. Beneath this her hair, luxuriant in growth, in color almost black, but in the sunshine showing a faint tinge of bronze, a pleasing modification of her father's brick-red locks.

About her trim, supple waist was buckled a morocco belt, supporting a brace of pearl-handled revolvers, small in size, but carrying a ball heavy enough to be of service against either man or beast in case of need. And from between the gold buttons of her snug-fitting waist, peeped the jeweled hilt of a keen-pointed, double-edged dagger.

All this Nash Whildon saw as he hastened toward Queen Nadine. Not that it was anything new to him. As she was now, so might she have been seen almost any day in the year. But when a man is as deeply in love as was this handsome fellow, the old is ever new.

"I dreamed all night of having the pleasure of riding over from Falcon Ranch with you, this morning, Queen Nadine," Whildon whispered, as he bowed his blonde head over the daintily-gloved hand.

"And in a dream, lost the reality," with a laugh that was music itself.

Nadine spoke Spanish only to her father, as a rule. Just now there was not even the faintest accent to betray her nativity on her mother's side. And her usual fire, the animation which formed one of her greatest charms, was lacking as her great eyes roved from the rancher's face to a little group some distance away.

Nash Whildon saw this, and a frown flitted across his face. He was keen-witted enough, even though in love, to read that glance aright. And into his face came a shadow that seemed to age him half a score years; almost the same look that had caused big David Browning to turn pale and shrink back only a brief space before.

"One would almost swear the servant was the master," with a nod that pointed his speech.

"Are you alluding to Mr. Archer?" coldly asked Nadine.

"To the foreman of the Falcon Ranch. Perhaps I should have called him an officer, instead of a private, from the frills he is putting on."

"What you call him matters little, so long as you are beyond his hearing. What I call him is—my good friend."

"And suitor, why not add?" with a forced smile.

"I might have a worse one—Nash Whildon, for instance!"

The words came with a smile and a bow, but there was a gleam in those dark eyes that warned the rancher to swallow the words that rose so hotly in his throat. Nor did he venture to detain the lady as she turned and swept away without further speech.

"Have your head for a little, my dashing filly!" he grated between his strong teeth as he scowled at the young man who had so unconsciously won him this rebuff. "It will not be for long, though! Before the sun goes down I'll put the curb on and tame you down—or break both our necks in the effort!"

Notelegant; almost brutal; but Nash Whildon was a gentleman only in outward seeming. What his past life had been before he settled down as a ranch-owner and stock-raiser in Texas, no man save himself seemed to know; but few doubted the existence of "a bad drop" in his veins.

During the earlier days of his new life, some people had rather broadly hinted at his "putting on too much agony," and more than one attempt had been made to put him in his proper place. What that place was, Nash Whildon had altogether different ideas from the one entertained by his critics, and in proving their errors, he made for himself a record far more satisfactory to himself than to their friends. He showed himself master of bullet and steel, and never took the trouble to count the odds against him. He went into a fight, as he came out of one, with a cold, sneering smile upon his thin lips; but there was a fire in his blue eyes that fairly scorched as it fell upon the face of an adversary.

Nash Whildon made no secret of his passion for Queen Nadine, and of late days those who might otherwise have scorched their wings while fluttering about the bright light, rather fought shy of temptation, the more readily that the lady of Falcon Ranch gave none of them even the ghost of encouragement. With the eyes of a thorough coquette, Nadine seemed to care nothing about exercising them. Unless—

It seemed ridiculous on the face of it, yet there were not wanting those who half-smiled, half-frowned whenever they thought of Pink Archer, the stalwart young foreman of the Falcon Ranch. And Parker Mandrake, who was noted for his "sure thing" propensities, even went so far as to invest a snug sum "at evens" on Pink Archer as against Nash Whildon in "the Falcon stake!"

If Pink Archer had serious thoughts in that direction, his actions on this occasion were peculiar enough.

A grave, quiet, straight forward young man was this foreman. Not nearly so handsome as was his reputed rival, but with a better face in every respect; a face which won upon one the longer it was known; the face of a true friend, a frank enemy.

And just now it was a handsome face, too, lighted up with a smile that betrayed the honest delight he felt in the companionship of the golden-haired, blue-eyed little Nellie Angell, who blushed so charmingly as she avoided his eyes—the eyes in which she had just read the manly love his lips had hardly dared utter as yet.

No one in their sober senses would have thought of drawing a comparison between Queen Nadine and this little Nellie—"Angel Nell" as those nearest and dearest the little girl were wont to call her. The queen so proud and haughty, so regally beautiful in face and figure, so rich in her sole heirship to the great Falcon Ranch, with its thousands of hoofs and horns, its almost boundless ranges. And the other: only the daughter of "Angel Sam," whose title was the only thing celestial about him.

And yet, as Queen Nadine saw how gently, how tenderly yet deferentially young Archer bent over that dainty, gold-crowned head, something close akin to envy sprung up in her proud, passionate heart.

It was this that made her turn so abruptly away from Nash Whildon, lest his coldly keen eyes should read the jealousy in her flushing cheeks and flashing orbs; a jealousy that made her wish a thunderbolt might descend from the clear sky and make Nellie an angel in fact as she was in name.

It was this fierce pang that led her to move toward the spot where the trio stood—for Sam Angell rarely permitted Nellie to pass beyond

his protecting shadow, such was his fear of ill befalling her. Not even to her own heart would the queen admit that she was jealous, least of all of a pink-and-white doll like this!

And yet, she drew a quick breath of relief as she caught the voice of Hugh Falconer calling aloud her name, and her step was lighter as she turned to obey the summons.

The colonel was unusually affable for him, that morning. The celebration was wholly his own idea, and already he was convinced that it was to prove a complete success, so far as his hidden motives were concerned.

He had spared neither pains nor money in carrying out the preliminaries, and unless something unforeseen should arise, he knew that the time and dollars had not been spent in vain.

The natural advantages were great, and a more convenient scene for the prearranged festivities could hardly have been made to order; a mesa-like elevation in the otherwise level plain, comprising several acres of fertile ground. In the center was a miniature lake, clear and cool, fed by an unfailing spring whose waters bubbled up from a bed of white sand. A thick carpet of short grass reached to the very edge of the waters, stretching back beneath the trees with which the mesa was crowned.

Beneath these trees a number of new tents were erected, for the use of the ladies. Here and there were swung hammocks, and at the foot of almost every tree were spread skins and robes of tame beast and wild, from the shaggy mat of the grizzly bear to the parti-colored hide of "paint mustang."

To the rear, partially screened from sight by a fringe of smaller trees, were men and women busily engaged in culinary operations on a grand scale.

In another secluded nook stood several kegs, behind an improvised bar which glittered with glassware. A smiling, white-aproned negro presided over this bar, and early as the day was, his position proved to be no sinecure.

"Dey ain't no chalk, an' de slate is done bu'st-ed, sah!"

Ebony Tom bobbed and grinned as he shook his woolly head at the offer of gold.

"Settle wid de boss when he han' in he bill, please, sah! Hope you done draw de breff ob life untwel you git dat 'count, sah! Yes, indeedy!"

And what was the secret of all this preparation? Hugh Falconer, knowing that he was not liked by his neighbors, had especial reasons for wishing to stand higher in the good graces of several. If the lavish expenditure of gold could bring this about, he felt that neither time nor money would be wasted.

Possibly he would not have worried so much over the matter had he not been able to contrast his own reception with that which had ever awaited his brother, Pierce Falconer, before that relative's death.

Cold, reserved, almost austere though the former owner of Falcon Ranch had been, he was both respected and loved by his neighbors. His lightest word seemed law to them, and a grasp of his firm fingers was worth riding half a day to gain. And when word came back of his death, there was sincere mourning in almost every home for leagues and leagues around.

Hugh Falconer fell heir to the property, but he had not as yet been able to "fill the shoes" of his brother. It would have been a difficult task for the best and wisest of men, and the colonel was neither one nor the other. A shadow fell upon Falcon Ranch with the death of its founder as a ranch, which still hovered over it, persistently though both father and daughter sought to lift it off.

Colonel Hugh was still uncomfortably conscious of this fact, even while smiling blandly at the many compliments his enterprise received, and it was this feeling more than aught else, that led to his summoning Nadine to his side. With her support he felt better able to maintain the struggle.

Pink Archer drew a soft breath of relief as his keen eyes noted the change in course of Queen Nadine. Devoted as he seemed to Nell, he was not quite blind to his surroundings, and a few words which had dropped from the red lips of the ranch mistress on the past evening kept ringing in his ears with painful distinctness.

They brought a flush to his bronzed cheeks as he glanced down at the shy, half-averted face of his companion. What if she were to suspect them? What if Nadine were to repeat them in her hearing?

His honest brown eyes flashed brightly, yet with sudden sternness, and his square jaws set hardly for an instant. Just then he looked more like an avenger than a lover.

He knew that he was foolish in thus acting, after those words from the lips of Queen Nadine, but this was his first opportunity of seeing and listening to Nellie for more than a week—an age, he told himself.

The respite was brief. Nadine paused only a few minutes with her parent, then, with a defiant glance toward Nash Whildon, who was keeping a jealous watch upon her actions, she glided across the grass to the spot where the young foreman stood.

Sam Angell saw her coming, and an uneasy

frown darkened his wrinkled face as he hastily grasped the arm of his daughter, muttering:

"Let's take a walk, birdy—they's somethin' I want to show ye. An' I reckon the leddy wants to see Pink on business. I reckon—"

Pink Archer made a motion as though he would check Nellie, but the clear, musical voice of Queen Nadine caused his hand to drop back to his side as he turned to confront her.

"Hurry, birdy!" muttered Sam, drawing away, with a clumsy pretense of ignorance. "They's heaps to see, an' ef we don't keep movin' we'll lose the biggest half o' the doin's, so we will, now!"

"Sorry to interrupt you while so pleasantly engaged, Mr. Archer, but as father depends mainly on you for carrying out his plans, you must postpone your flirting until a more favorable opportunity."

Clear, cold, cutting the tones, and Sam Angell grated his yellow teeth as he saw Nellie flush and then turn white, as he felt her arm quiver painfully in his grasp.

"Never you mind, birdy," huskily muttered the old fellow, his tall, gaunt figure drawing erect as he flashed an angry glance over his shoulder at that proudly scornful face. "It ain't no leddy that's talkin', high an' mighty as she thinks herself jes' now! She's lookin' at the two o' us like we was lower then the dirt onderneath the feet o' her! Who keeps? Ef I wanted, I could lay her pride lower then that same dirt! I could whisper words that would turn her—stiddy, birdy!" as Nellie tripped over a slight obstruction which she could not see for the mist that filled her blue eyes.

Angel Sam passed a sinewy arm about her little waist, drawing her under cover of a friendly bush, his little gray eyes flashing hatred and defiance back at the regal figure of Queen Nadine. His lips parted as though to say more, but before he could speak, a wild tumult arose on the air, coming from beyond the edge of the mesa.

And after an instant's pause of startled amaze the crowd rushed in the direction whence the alarm arose, more than one hand mechanically seeking the ready pistol-butt.

CHAPTER III.

A HART ROYAL.

As before mentioned, the mesa was surrounded by an almost perfectly level plain, covered with grass that, even at that early day, looked brown and sear.

For miles upon miles there was not a tree to be seen, save upon the mesa itself. Here and there a stunted bush or clump of briars were visible, but that was all. Nothing romantic or picturesque, but an admirable range for cattle.

Nearer to the mesa, with one of its nearly perpendicular walls forming part of the barrier, strong pens and corrals had been formed, for this portion of the Falcon Range was a favorite one for use during the semi-annual "round-ups."

Colonel Hugh Falconer had determined on giving his guests something more than a feast, for he felt that that alone would hardly prove sufficient to attract all whom he most wished to conciliate.

He had made all necessary arrangements for what might be called a "Texas Tournament," and aside from the really liberal prizes which were to reward the successful contestants, there was honor to be won by those deserving the laurels.

For days past his cowboys had been scouring the ranges, cutting out and rounding-up the fiercest, most active bulls they could find among the many thousands of head that occupied the Falcon Ranch. One by one these savage creatures—as much like the civilized bull as a royal tiger is like the tamed and trained inmate of a menagerie cage—were driven to the mesa and penned securely until wanted.

And while Colonel Falconer was addressing his guests above, a lot of cowboys were leisurely inspecting the captive animals, shrewdly speculating on the sport which each animal might be expected to afford.

"They ain't no goose-hair thar, I'm shoutin'," sagely observed one veteran, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "The boy that gits away with the pick o' the lot, hain't larned his business sleepin' with the boss, now you want to listen to my chant!"

Enigmatical though his speech may read, it was familiar enough to those who listened. To the uninitiated it may be added in passing that "a goose-hair bed," "sleeping with the boss," or "riding ten horses," is the cowboy paraphrase for "a soft snap."

There was no denial, for the assertion was self-evident. The cowboys employed by the colonel had done their level best to carry out his instructions, and the lot of bulls would have made a glorious showing in the most bloody bull-ring of Old Spain.

"Durn the tailin' an' sech like," grunted another veteran, with a side glance toward the first speaker. "That's only boy's play, all told, when you git down to hard-pan. What I'm bankin' on is the wind-up 'tween the pick o' the two ranches. Thar's goin' to be the fun fer my

hard cash—wish't thet I only hed more to squander onto it!"

"Wish you did—an' me too," with a half-defiant grin. "Turn out the hull muster, an' mebbe Falcon Ranch kin lay over the Open Hand, fer the same reason that a rijiment kin git away with a single comp'ny. But—an' that but is bigger than all the rest o' the tree, you want to mind, pardner! But—man to man, leavin' out the runts an' the scrubs an' the tailin's; waal, ef the Open Hand don't git thar, then I go bu'st fer a year to come!"

Other voices chimed in, earnest enough, but without anything like malice, though each partisan stood up stoutly for the ranch on which he was employed, but their speeches need not be recorded here, since the result must speak for itself in due time.

For years past there had been a generous rivalry between the Falcon Ranch and the Open Hand Ranch, now owned by Nash Whildon, though it had been in different hands up to a short time before the death of Pierce Falconer. Each ranch claimed to possess the best men with rope or rein, and though the dispute had never been put to an actual test as yet, each round-up was rendered more interesting through this rivalry. And now, by mutual conse it, the owners of the two ranches were to send an equal number of their selected champions into the field to do battle for the coveted honor.

Naturally enough the cowboys were deeply interested in this part of the projected sports, and for some little time they were oblivious to all else—in their eager discussion. But then a pair of restless eyes noted a tall, scantily-clad horseman near the end of the corral, quietly gazing at the restless bulls within the pens.

"Injun, by mighty!" he cried, with savage impatience such as only one born or brought up on the border could fully appreciate. "The boss said this was to be a free-fer-all, but durned ef I reckoned on hev'in' to pard in with red niggers!"

Sharp and clear his angry voice rung out, and one brown hand instinctively moved back until it rested on a revolver-butt. Though the day for Indian raids was long since over, the prejudice against color remained as strong as ever, and few Texans could see an Indian without a longing for taking his scalp, or his life, at least.

At the first ejaculation the red rider glanced swiftly in that direction, and as though he deemed prudence to be the better part of valor, he reined back his horse, turning as though to seek more congenial quarters.

But that was not to save him, though after the first instinctive motion toward their guns, the cowboys had no further thought of slaying in cold blood. But the keen-eyed cowboy who made the discovery let out a shrill yell of warning, then cried:

"Dollars to cents that I make the fu'st fast!"

That was enough for his excitement-loving fellows, and amid wild yells and wilder laughs, each man plunged for his horse, eager to have the cream of the fun—as they regarded it.

The Indian was watching them warily over his shoulder as he rode slowly away from the corral, as yet seeming ignorant of their real intentions. That his presence was unwelcome he must have divined, and the readiness with which he accepted the hint showed a laudable desire to avoid trouble.

As the cowboys rushed for their animals, with the wild yells that startled the guests on the mesa top, the red rider tightened his rein a bit, settling himself more firmly on the doubled blanket that served him as saddle. He still watched the cowboys, but though his horse stepped out more lively, there was nothing like absolute flight in his actions.

"Skin out, you red nigger!" yelled the hot-blooded cowboy as he spurred away from the corral, taking the neatly coiled lasso from its resting-place. "Give us a show fer our money, an' yar goes fer the fu'st rope!"

The yellow horse on which the Indian sat darted ahead for a few rods, as though frightened by the wild yells and cries, then slackened its pace under the strong grip on the reins, its rider still looking back over his shoulder. Even yet he seemed unable to realize his peril.

A snaky coil came hovering through the air, its wide-spread noose hovering over the head of the Indian, and already the cowboy was laughing recklessly at his triumph over his fellows, when the red-skin flung up a rifle, grasped by the middle with one muscular hand, and the lasso was swept aside just in time to save his neck from the loop.

"Nother day, Johnny!" laughed the broad-shouldered cowboy who had first spoken in defense of the Open Hand champions. "The Open Hand boys is the boys fer money or sand! Fu'st rope fer—huh!"

With lasso swinging at his side for an under-hand cast by which to end the chase and win the laurels at one and the same time, without actually endangering the life of the fugitive, the Open Hand cowboy shot past his discomfited rival. He, too, was sure of success, only to be foiled quite as adroitly as his predecessor.

The aim was true enough, but seemingly of its

own volition, the clay-bank horse bounded abruptly to one side, thus escaping the noose which was intended for its legs.

"Falcon Ranch!"

"Open Hand forever!"

With rival cries mingling, the now thoroughly excited cowboys spurred their steeds on in pursuit of the swift clay-bank, the Indian crouching low along its back, with rifle grasped by the middle in one hand, while the other held a glittering knife ready for swift work in case of need. Not in a straggle-away flight, for that would make the work of tripping him still more easy, but in an erratic circle he sped around, now warding off a whistling coil with rifle, now deftly slashing at another with his gleaming knife.

Right well he played his part, and those standing along the brink of the mesa wall cheered enthusiastically at each change and shifting, for the most part taking this to be the opening scene in the promised exhibition.

But the fugitive now knew that it was in vicious earnest, sport though it had been at first for the cowboys. Proud of their skill with the rope, it was bitter as death to be repeatedly foiled by a "red nigger," and those whose lassoos had been severed by that flashing blade, pressed closer, more viciously upon the Indian, resolved to win by foul play since fair means had failed them.

"Mill the durned nigger, mates!" grated one of the cowboys, casting aside his useless *riata*. "Ring 'round an' then close in an' hammer him clean down to Chiny!"

Here and there the yellow horse leaped and dashed, snorting and showing its perfect training even amidst its fright at the savage yelling of its pursuers. Lower crouched the Indian, now lying along the side of his horse to escape a double cast, now whirling rifle or knife to strike down the snake-like coils that hissed above his head. He was making a gallant fight—was doing what not one man out of a thousand could have done for so long against such odds; but the end was drawing nigh, as all could see.

Already the cowboys were surrounding him, and were rapidly closing in, baffled for a time by the erratic shifting of the clay-bank. There was no longer a chance for him to escape by actual flight. He could only postpone the end, which all saw must soon come, by his really marvelous horsemanship, not change the result.

And from the excited spectators on the mesa top came a general cry of disapprobation as they caught sight of another horseman speeding straight for the thick of the mass, swinging a long-looped lasso above his head, as though bent on winning the prize so nearly in the grasp of the others.

But the cry abruptly altered its tenor as the group watched what followed.

The sweeping loops struck and knocked down two lassoos even as they went coiling toward the Indian, and then, with a ringing shout the newcomer plunged into the mass, sending men to the right and the left as though a catapult had hurled a resistless missile into their ranks.

"Fair play's a jewel, and this isn't even a counterfeit!" came clear and sharp above the tumult, reaching even the eager ears on the mesa top. "You're too mighty careless with your shoestrings, gent! Look out, or they'll get hurt—didn't I tell you so, pard?"

The long loops were dropped clear, and a bright blade flashed in the sunlight, severing rope after rope, now on one side, now on the other, as the mighty black horse carried its reckless rider through the crowded mass to the small clear space occupied by the Indian.

A clear, taunting laugh greeted the surprised and temporarily demoralized cowboys, and before they could fairly realize what had so rudely interrupted their sport, the stranger was side by side with the Indian, both sitting erect, both with armed hands, and each man looking as though ready to burn powder in case of further crowding.

"Steady—as you were!" sharply cried the stranger, tossing back his long yellow locks as his hands swept around in half circles, the grim muzzles of two revolvers staring the cowboys full in the face. "Bay as much as pleases you, but keep your distance! I'm a royal hart of twelve points—and right here you see them! Six in each hoof, and more where they come from! Every point dipped in poison and warranted to kill in a holy second! Hair turned the wrong way, and flag at half-mast! *That's me—the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow!*"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOUNDING BUCK, FROM BUFFALO WALLOW. CONFUSED, startled, taken wholly by surprise, the cowboys hovered irresolute, staring open-mouthed at the glib-tongued stranger who had so deftly robbed them of their anticipated prey.

Very business-like he looked as he confronted them just then, even though there was a smile upon his face as he looked over the deftly manipulated revolvers with which he seemed ready to emphasize the warning which so freely passed his lips.

"Rush him, too, double-durn the critter!" snarled one of the cowboys who seemed to feel defeat the most sorely.

"Who's he, to hold out fer a red nigger, anyway?"

"Shoot, Luke, or give up your gun!"

From one pair of lips to another leaped the ejaculations, and the keen blue eyes of the stranger followed in tune, still with that smile upon his lips as his polished tools moved back and forth, seeming to cover and hold each and every one of the score cowboys by whom the twain were surrounded.

And the red-skin on whose behalf he had ventured to interfere, sitting erect, looking more like a master than a slave despite his color and scanty attire, silently seconded his champion. His bronze face might have been a metal mold for all the emotion it expressed as his red hands gently swayed the repeating rifle, with thumb on hammer and forefinger within the trigger guard. But his eyes; black as jet and glittering as vividly as ever those of an enraged serpent in coil!

"Now don't jump in before you get a good ready, lad; for it isn't a goose-hair bed you'll drop on, you want to remember," lightly cried the yellow-haired sport. "Hate to upset your calculations, the worst sort, but I'm a missionary in charge of our red brethren, and this gent is one of our pet converts. Lay the weight of a finger on him, and I'm bound to kick worse than a mule in earnest. Step on his—"

"N' who're you, anyhow?"

"A royal hart of twelve—but don't make me prove it, unless you've exhausted this pasture, and long for another range beyond the Great Divide!"

Still with that bland smile upon his face, but with a change of voice that lent the words a warning they hardly contained of themselves.

Only for the weapons which covered them, the cowboys might have backed down, since there had really been no malicious intent in their primal actions. Now that they had taken time to catch their breath, the majority were half-ashamed of their united exploit. But they could not take water in the face of those tools; they could not back down from any two men, even though the jest should be turned into grim earnest!

Those keen blue eyes were not idle during this brief interval of silence, and their owner was far from being a fool. Bold and reckless though he had proved himself, he was not so carried away by a temporary success as to imagine that he could win against such heavy odds, should worst come to worst. Let a shot be fired, let a blow be struck in bitter earnest, and by a single rush the encircling cowboys could trample them to pulp beneath the hoofs of their horses; could, and most assuredly would do so!

"I don't want to do it, gents," he added, quickly, with frank sincerity. "I'm not yearning to turn this frolic into a funeral, for I came here in search of fun and not a bloody winding-sheet. I'd weep tears of red-hot brine at being forced to turn any one of you toes-up to the daisies, but—"

"Put up your guns, or else make use of 'em!" grated one of the cowboys, dropping his useless lasso and glancing swiftly around at his fellow riders.

The stranger touched his red pard with a toe as he spoke out:

"Up they go, if you like that better, gentle pilgrim. And—down you go, though you were bigger'n a mountain!"

As swiftly as they had flashed forth, the brace of revolvers vanished from sight, leaving the bronzed hands of the yellow-haired sport free for other action. And at the second sentence he sent the big black horse forward, stooping in the saddle as he shot between two of the riders.

Stooped, to raise again, with each hand gripping the foot of a cowboy—and as a mocking laugh broke from those lips, a vigorous heave cast both horsemen end over end out of the saddle!

And though not a word had passed between them, the Indian deftly seconded his champion, with much the same result, though with variations.

As the clay-bank shot forward, each bronzed hand clutched a throat and swept a man backward over the croup of his steed, hurling them headlong to the trampled ground with force sufficient to put them out of the struggle for at least the time being, if no worse befell.

Clear and mellow rung out the laugh of the strange sport as he sped away on the back of his gallant steed, turning to note the effect of this unexpected dash on the enemy. Then, as though on a pivot, the two horses wheeled about and faced the confused cowboys. Over their ears showed the grim muzzles once more, but the situation was a little changed.

Then, the pair had been surrounded. Now, they had all their adversaries in front, with a clear course for retreat should they be pressed too hardly by odds.

"Empty hands you called for, and empty hands we showed, adding a few empty saddles by way of make-weight. You can fill them again, but if we have to vacate any others, there'll be new faces above the seats! Steady, gentlemen! I'm a seasoned stag, and pretty well used to mixed company, but my horns are still in the velvet and I'm mighty ticklish about crowding! Fun is fun, but this is *business!*"

"You bet it is!" grated one of the riders whom he had so deftly removed from the saddle, springing to the back of his horse again, dashing a hand across his eyes to clear them of dust and dirt.

"Hold hard, Boston!" thundered a stern voice from the rear, as a sterner-faced horseman came dashing toward the scene from the mesa.

"Any more want to chip in?" cried the stranger, swinging one armed hand around to cover the new-comer. "Don't be bashful, I beg of you! The bigger the crowd the more credit there'll be in clearing you out!"

Pink Archer paid no attention to the weapon that followed his movements so closely, one hand motioning the angry cowboys back as they gathered for a united rush upon the twain. And his voice was full of stern menace as he added:

"Back, you snarling curs! I took you for white, but I see now that I've been color-blind all along! Twenty against one—"

"Two, pard!" cried the stranger, with a reckless laugh, as he added: "Two, when we ain't in motion: then we're a thousand! If it's on our account you're chipping in, don't waste your tissue. But if it's through fear for your precious dough-boys, that's a horse of another color, and we'll put up our patent spankers until we run across a tougher crowd!"

"You hear him beller, boss!" coaxingly muttered one of the riders who had so unceremoniously vacated the saddle a few moments before. "You won't stick out fer a back-down now, will ye?"

"I'm ashamed of you, men of Falcon Ranch!" cried Pink Archer, without paying attention to either speaker, as he faced the sullen, crestfallen horsemen. "I thought you were men, instead of cowards—and worse! It was bad enough for a score to set upon a single rider, but to let him play with you after this fashion! Where are your ropes? What means that dirt between your shoulders? Bah! you are not *my* men! You are a lot of smooth-faced impostors run away from school to play cowboy!"

"We ain't *your* men, any way, critter!" growled the broad-shouldered fellow who championed the Open Hand Ranch. "Ride over him, ef he don't cut dirt, boys! Down them two whelps, ef it's the last—"

A sharp whistle broke from the lips of Pink Archer at this hot-headed outburst, and the swift response on the part of his men showed how perfectly he had disciplined them. Instantly there were two forces confronting each other, seemingly ready to fly at each other's throats at a single word.

"Open Hand ag'inst Falcon! An' thar comes the boss!"

"Button your lips, Lazy Lupton!" sharply cried Nash Whildon, as he dashed up to the spot, passing by Pink Archer and his men without giving them even a glance. "Do you take this for a bear-garden? Do I pay you for kicking up a row at a peaceable gathering? Silence, you dog!" and as the epithet came hissing through his clinched teeth, the Open Hand owner flashed forth a revolver, thrusting its muzzle almost into that sullen, scowling visage.

"Another growl, and I'll do you up for keeps!"

"Not on our account, pard," cheerily called out the yellow-haired sport, riding forward with a bland smile playing over his handsome face. "Let the fellow go, and call it square, for my sake."

Nash Whildon flashed a dark glance over his shoulder at the interruption, then wheeled his horse and confronted the speaker, pistol still in hand.

"Who asked you to chip in, anyhow? Who are you? Where did you come from, and what do you want?"

"You're from the land of yellow pumpkins and apple-sass, or there's no truth in the old saying," smiled the stranger, lightly swinging one leg across the neck of his black steed, sitting "lady-fashion" as he added: "I'm Royal Hart, a rustler and a hustler, by name and occupation. I'm from Buffalo Wallow, and my go-to-meeting title is the Bounding Buck from Antlerdom. As for what I want—room according to my size and aspirations. If you feel crowded, there's a county adjoining this, and maybe you can find an unoccupied corner by close search!"

"You've got a precious glib tongue of your own, anyway."

"I was born with it, my dear fellow," with an affected yawn behind a curved palm that was insolence itself.

Then came a sudden and complete change. He sat erect in his saddle and placed one hand upon the arm of the Indian who had silently moved to his side. His handsome face grew grave, and there was thinly-veiled emotion in his tones as he added:

"Only an Indian, as you can see for yourselves, gentlemen, but red though his skin may look to *your* eyes, it is *white* in *mine*—white as the heart he bears in his honest bosom! Only an Indian—but he's my pard, and when you tread on his corns, it's my voice that cries out!"

"A glib tongue, you said, stranger," with a short nod toward Nash Whildon. "I acknowledged the corn, all the more readily because I am provided with a fair excuse. I've got to

speaking for two: for Red Clam, as well as myself.

"And right there you've got the solution, gentleman. My pard is dumb, or he'd be doing part of the talking for himself."

"What brought him here?" frowned Whildon, keenly eying the red-skin as he sat his horse like a statue of bronze. "We've no use for his sort."

"He followed my lead. But perhaps you have no use for me, either?"

"The range is free for all who behave themselves," said Archer.

"That's my best holt, stranger," smiled Royal Hart, with a bland bow toward the young foreman of the Falcon Ranch. "I'm mild as new milk when I'm the only one assailed. If any one among this crowd was cruel enough to smite me on the jaw, I'd turn unto him the mate, with tears of meek and lowly resignation in the two eyes o' me. But," and his voice rung out clear and stern as he added: "But if you want to see my hair turn the wrong way of the grain and electric sparks flash out of each tine of my crown, just try to impose on Red Clam."

"My pard, gentlemen, with all that title implies. Red outside, but whiter than undrifted snow within! An Indian, but the truest friend mortal man was ever blessed with. I owe him my life, thrice over. I'm ready to pay back the debt whenever the time comes, though a thousand instead of a score of ruffians tackled him."

"I came here to join in the jollification, but if you don't like my looks, kick me out forthwith; tan my hide to twist into quirts; take my scalp to braid into a head-stall; and I'll never whimper. But—look crooked at Red Clam, and you'll see me transformed into a howling cyclone with the business-end right where the gang crowds thickest!"

And if ever mortal man was in earnest, they saw him then.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRICE OF A STEEL TONGUE.

TOUGH and reckless though they may be, owing to their surroundings and associations, no class of men in all the world are truer and firmer friends than the much-maligned cowboys. Try to "put on frills" before them, and they will never rest until they have taken you down to eat "humble pie." Meet them on a common footing and they welcome you as an equal; the highest and proudest in all the land has no license to claim more.

Thus it came that a speech which would have intensified the worst passions of really evil men, served to conciliate the cowboys on this occasion, and when Royal Hart ceased, a cheer broke from bearded lips as the men who had but a few minutes before burned to "down him," now crowded around eager to grasp his hand as a worthy comrade.

"You too, Injun!" cried the hot-head who had started the affair, slapping Red Clam on the shoulder with one hand while he spat into the other and raised it to add emphasis to the offered grip. "Be darned if I ever thought I'd say it, but you're clean sixteen to the dozen, ef you hev got a copper hide onto you!"

This was the rule, though several of the Open Hand gang rode silently away from the spot at the heels of their chief, who hardly paused to hear the last of Royal Hart's response to his grim questions. Among them were the two fellows who had been so deftly unhorsed by the blonde stranger: Lazy Lupton and a slender, wiry Mexican.

A grim smile came into the honest face of Pink Archer as he noted this, and saw that Royal Hart was glancing after the retreating forms.

"They belong to another crowd from ours, you see, friend," was his quiet explanation. "There is a natural antagonism between the two ranches, and though we're friends for the day, it hardly comes natural for them to ride in line with my lads."

"Bless you, pard, I'm not worrying over it," laughed Royal Hart, wholly at his ease among those whom he had opposed but a short space before. "I was only wondering when and where I've met that fine gentleman before!"

The same thought seemed to be troubling Nash Whildon as he rode back toward the mesa. A frown corrugated his white brow. His blue eyes seemed burning with a light that turned them almost black. His strong teeth came together with a sharp click as he jerked up his horse until Lazy Lupton gained his side, while a motion sent the other men on ahead.

"Who is that fellow, Lupton? Where did he come from, and when?"

"I'll never tell you, boss!" with a surly, vicious glance over his shoulder. "Never see'd him afore this day. But I'll see him ag'in, ef it's in the wood! See him—an' he'll feel me, you bet!"

A short, mocking laugh broke from the lips of his master, and there was an open sneer in his voice as he uttered:

"To even up, you think? You must have felt him, when you took that tumble out yonder! I could hardly believe my own eyes! You—the champion of Open Hand! Bah! I begin to think I was an idiot for accepting the colonel's

challenge, after all! If you can't make out better than that, my good money is gone to the dogs!"

Lazy Lupton showed his teeth in a vicious grin.

"That was in fun; this'll be in dead earnest. Ef the Open Hand don't git thar in good style I'll—"

"See that it does get there, my fine fellow!" grated Whildon, giving his horse free rein and a vicious touch of the spur, dashing past his sullen-browed men and leaping from the saddle as he gained the foot of the mesa, up which he nimbly climbed.

"Nothing but a stray red-skin," he coldly uttered as a number of interested spectators crowded around him with questions as to the outcome. "Just a bit of frolic on the part of the boys, for lack of better amusement."

"Wasn't it your brag pair of riders that—"

"Stuffed clothes, of course," with a bland smile that was flatly contradicted by the fire that flashed in his blue eyes. "Still, my betting book has a few vacant pages, if any of you gentlemen wish to speculate on the closing event of the day. Don't hurry. Think it over and put your good money where it bids fair to bring you the best interest. Meantime—a word with you, colonel, please."

Smooth and even enough his tones as he uttered the request, but a peculiar shade crept into the face of the ranch-owner as he caught its meaning.

Nash Whildon turned away as soon as the words passed his lips, walking toward the other side of the mesa, like one who took it for granted his request would be complied with.

And so, after a barely perceptible hesitation on the part of Hugh Falconer, it was. The owner of Falcon Ranch strode after the other, a forced smile upon his harsh, rugged features until after he had cleared the little group of gentlemen with whom he had been discussing the exciting scene on the plain below.

"Cut it short, will you?" he snapped, with a furtive glance into the cold, set face of Nash Whildon as he came up with that worthy, near the edge of the mesa, where they were safe from eavesdropping. "Time the play was opening, and—"

"The day is still young, and we can spend a few minutes in coming to a better understanding, my dear fellow."

Calm, even courteous the tones, but Hugh Falconer frowned darker than ever as he stole another swift glance into that handsome face. One who saw his face just then, would have guessed he knew what was to come, and dreaded having his worst fears confirmed.

"We understand each other fairly well, I reckon. If not—curse it all, man!" with sudden fierceness. "Who are you to put on such a sanctimonious face before me? What do I owe you, anyway?"

"A calm and courteous hearing, Colonel Falconer," was the cold interruption. "Time enough to flare up when I have to use threats! Which I trust will be never, for your sake, even more than my own."

"I wish for peace, Falconer. I don't want to make use of the weapons which a lucky chance has placed at my disposal. I don't want to even name those weapons more clearly if I can possibly get along without it. But—mark this down in your books, will you?"

"I've got the power if I am compelled to make use of it. I know the weapons chance flung in my way, and I know how to use them to the best advantage—to my best advantage, of course!"

A low, short laugh parted his lips as he made the correction.

Hugh Falconer for the first time looked him squarely in the face, his own hard-set and grim, his red-veined eyes glowing with an ugly light as he harshly demanded:

"What are you trying to get through you, anyway? Do you care hint that there's anything crooked in my past life?"

For a brief space their eyes met squarely, a half-mocking, half-scornful light in the clear blue orbs. Then, as the colonel shifted his gaze uneasily, Nash Whildon spoke, smoothly, placidly:

"You choose your words poorly, my dear colonel. I never hint. I say in plain words that I hold you under my thumb. I say that I can drive you out from Falcon Ranch, an out-cast, a fugitive with a noose in hot chase. I say this—and you dare not deny its truth!"

"I do deny it, curse you!" grated the colonel, harshly.

Nash Whildon laughed again, harder, more mercilessly than before.

"And in denying it thus, you give plainest proof of the full truth of my statement. If I lied—if I exaggerated one iota—you would shoot me down without stopping to bandy words further!"

"I don't want to raise a row just now!"

"Nor do I; and for this reason I've drawn you aside where we can come to a full understanding. Look here, colonel: I'll turn over to you every scrap of evidence I hold against you and yours, for a consideration. Promise me the hand of your daughter in marriage, and I'll

bury the past so deep that even the crack of doom can't resurrect it!"

Hugh Falconer forced a laugh, but it came only from his lips.

"You're a mighty wise man, according to your own saying, Whildon, but if you reckon Nadine by that rule, you're 'way off! If she says no, what would my saying yes amount to?"

"If I am willing to run the chances, you hardly ought to kick," with a fleeting smile. "Then I am to consider the promise made?"

Hugh Falconer kicked doggedly at a pebble imbedded in the dry ground, his brows corrugated, his lips tightly compressed. Watching him keenly, Nash Whildon waited for an answer, with the air of a man who feels himself master of the situation.

"Look here, Whildon!" glancing up with darkened face and stern voice. "You've made it mighty hard for me to say what I've always been more than willing to say since our acquaintance first begun. If I say yes, you'll think it is because I'm afraid of your covert threats!"

"Consider the words unspoken, dear colonel," smiled the other.

"So far as I'm concerned, you are at liberty to win Nadine, if you can. I have been willing from the very first. You are well fixed, and as the two ranches adjoin, it would be a grand thing to bring them both under the same rule. Yours, if you like, after I am gone."

"And you pass your word to this effect?"

"I say you need fear no objection on my part, if you can win Nadine," a little doggedly. "Curse it, man! would you have me do your wooing for you?"

"Not exactly," with the ghost of a smile flitting across his handsome face. "But I'd have you do your part; and the first move in that direction is to get rid of that infernal foreman of yours!"

"Pink Archer, you mean?"

"Have you so many foremen? Pink Archer I mean—yes! A good enough foreman, no doubt, but unless I'm wide off in my guess, the impudent rascal looks higher than that! He's playing a cold hand for the Falcon Ranch, and Queen Nadine is not too proud to give him pointers either!"

Hugh Falconer flashed up sharply, his eyes ablaze, his face darkening with passion, his voice harsh and even menacing:

"Pick and choose your words, Nash Whildon!"

"Do you think they taste so sweet between my lips?" with a fierce sneer. "Do you think I would utter them without knowing I had ample proof to back them up? Use your own eyes today, and satisfy yourself if you doubt my truth! Watch Nadine when she is near that cool scoundrel. Try to see her eyes, and tell me what you see there!"

"I'll turn him off in the morning, if you say so," muttered the colonel, his red face turning a shade paler than usual. "I like him as little as you do, but I had no fair excuse for kicking him out. You know he has been on the place so long; and the boys think a heap of him, too! He gets double the amount of work out of them that any common man could, with one half the friction. Still—"

"Why not, when he looks on the place as almost his own," with a short, ugly laugh. "Why not, when he must see that Nadine is ready to drop into his arms at—Satan fly away with him!"

As Nash Whildon lost his composure, the colonel seemed to regain his, and as though repenting a hasty error, he shuffled back:

"If I could only hit on some plausible excuse for dropping the fellow overboard, I'd do it, gladly! But you see how it is, Whildon. I've got a mighty hard row to hoe, as the case stands. The neighbors don't cotton to us worth a cent, and they might raise a howl over a discharge without good cause to back it up. Now, if you could only—eh?"

"He's got to go—if he has to go feet foremost!"

"It's almost too much to hope for—to think of anything happening to the fellow, isn't it?" with a sickly smile. "He's one of the surest seats I know of, and lucky too! Never has met with an accident since he took the position of foreman. Too much to think of one happening to day! And yet—it'll be lively work, when the two gangs get fairly at each other! And—"

"What are you driving at, colonel?" softly uttered Whildon.

Hugh Falconer cast a swift glance around them, then muttered:

"I can't discharge the fellow, you know, without cause, but—if an accident should happen to him in the *melee*—eh?"

CHAPTER VI.

TAILING THE BULL.

THAT cold, handsome face told no tales, but something flashed into Nash Whildon's blue eyes that caused the colonel to wheel about quick as a flash, one hand mechanically moving toward a weapon.

He caught sight of Pink Archer, just gaining the mesa top, but of course too far away to have caught aught of the plot against his welfare. A

quick glance around showed him his employer, and advancing to the spot he addressed him:

"Everything is in readiness for the first event, whenever you please, colonel."

"And we're ready for it right now," with a half laugh that could not entirely conceal his nervousness. "Never do to let the griddle get cold, you know! Keep up your end, Archer, even—you're going to try your hand at the tailing, of course?"

"I hadn't thought of it, but—"

"Saving himself for the last act—and wisely, too!" sneered Nash Whildon, in an affected aside. "My boys are tough nuts to crack!"

"The ground is rather hard, over yonder!" murmured Archer, in the same tone, with a glance toward the spot where Lazy Lupton and Osorio the Roper had met with their downfall at the hands of Royal Hart.

"Got you there, pard," chuckled the colonel, with a dig at the ribs of the ranch-owner. "It was good for sore eyes to see those heels cut the air, and ever since I've had firmer faith in Falcon Ranch and its champions! But hike out, Pink, and set the ball to rolling! Work up the boys, and show 'em you're not above lending a hand, even if you are foreman. I've got money on you—but that don't count. Pull out!"

The foreman nodded, then turned on his heel and strode rapidly away to the winding path which led to the plain below. None the less briskly from catching sight of Queen Nadine and her burning black eyes.

A few moments later all was bustle on the mesa top. The sports were about to open in good earnest, and all were making their way down to take saddle who preferred that point of observation to watching the tests of skill and strength from the mesa top itself.

Nash Whildon strode toward Queen Nadine, but slackened his pace as he saw her gloved hand slip through the arm of a smiling rancher from up the range. His white teeth closed over his thin lip, but only for an instant. Then he smiled blandly to himself.

He felt that the game was fairly within his own hands, and he could afford to give a little rope at first.

Under the cool head of Pink Archer, the cowboys were gathered together and culled out, only those of known skill and adroitness being set aside for present idleness, leaving the larger portion ready and eager to show what they could do at "tailing the bull."

The veterans were flattered at this distinction, and the younger hands were led to believe their own superior merits had led to their election. Pink Archer knew how to handle his men.

Lots were drawn from a hat, to decide the order of running, and the young master of ceremonies briefly stated the conditions.

A bull was to be turned out of the corral, and the first man on the list was to follow after, his object being to fling the animal on its side, without use of rope or other aid, save its own tail and a pair of strong hands.

"You know all that, though, without my telling you, lads. You've tailed many a one for pure fun. But, mind you, there are ladies watching you now, and these bulls are the pick of the entire range. Keep cool and you'll get there in good shape, but lose your head and your seat will go with it—sure!"

"Waal, I do reckon!" drawled one of the "reserves," with more malice than thoughtfulness, as he noted the sober looks with which this warning was received. "Heap difference from pickin' out a stunted yearlin' or a stove-up steer for a end over in fun! Heap difference when you come to upset the biggest part of a ton o' clean muckle an' pure devilishness, jest by a tail-holt!"

"An' that tail so chuck full o' electricity that the fu'st grip'll drive the nails out o' both boot-heels, too!" grinned another veteran.

"They do say the boss hes writ' out a notice fer new han's to fill the places o' all he counts on losin' this day!"

"That's easy counted up, anyhow!" with a grinning glance along the line of horsemen who strove hard to show no signs of hearing these gibes, and by that very effort showing how keen they pricked.

Pink Archer, who had drawn his number with the rest, quite as much to keep the younger members in countenance as through the half-expressed wish of his employer, passed over to the corral and let down the bars, entering with whip in hand.

Uttering a low, savage bellow, the selected bull, a gaunt, yet powerful creature, with massive shoulders and cruel horns, lowered its grisly front and charged blindly at the footman. Cool, collected, knowing just what he was about, the foreman stood still until the horns were within their own length of his person, then sprung lightly aside, plying his whip with a force that sent tiny puffs of severed hair flying on the air with each stroke. And with a still more savage bellow, the bull bounded over the lowered bars.

It stopped short as it seemed to feel its freedom, tossing its head high, lashing its sides with its tufted tail, glaring around at the mounted men for a moment before dashing away at speed over the level.

In almost any bull-ring this creature would have been greeted with enthusiasm as a kingly victim, but Pink Archer knew its weak points, and had decided accordingly. It was sport the party were seeking, not a tragedy at the outset. And there is nothing so encouraging as an early success.

"Go for him, David!" cried the foreman, as the gaunt bull sped out in a direct line from the mesa, where all could witness the performance. "Cool and steady does it! Show the old hands what young blood can do in a pinch!"

That was one thing which made Pink Archer such a favorite with his men.

Where others gave curses, he offered encouragement. And as long as a man was willing to do his level best, no more was asked of him.

The jeers and mock consolations of the "reserve corps" had just a little unnerved the young fellow whom fate had elected for the first course, but those crisp sentences brought all that back with re-enforcements, and with hardly a thought of failure, the young cowboy dashed in chase of the bull, overtaking it, grasping the tail with a turn, then—with a furious bellow, the bull was flung fairly on its back!

To rebound, cat-like, to its feet and charge viciously at the shying mustang, thinking of revenge rather than flight.

Pink Archer led the cheering which greeted the adroit feat, and a smile came into his face as he saw how coolly, yet swiftly the cowboy eluded the charge, bearing in mind the general instructions about keeping the sport within easy range of the mesa.

"Your turn, Perry," with a nod to the second man. "Do as well, and we'll have the old hands hunting for gray hairs on that girl's chin of yours before the sun goes down! No hurry; Dave is holding him."

And so the sport went on, with slight variations, until the bull had been flung four several times. Then, at a sign from Pink Archer, the half crazed creature was permitted to seek safety in headlong flight, all the fight being driven out of its carcass for the time being.

The young foreman had drawn the fifth number, and while a nod sent a couple of men to the corrals to turn out a fresh animal, he quietly leaped into his saddle, ready to take his turn as humbly as any one of his men. It was part of the day's work, and as such he would perform it. Yet—he would have been less than human had not a thrill of pleasure shot through his heart as he saw how pale Nellie Angell had turned at sight of that powerful, foam-flecked creature now plunging out from the corral.

Even Pink Archer started as he recognized the animal, for its reputation was wide as the range, and he had selected it for quite a different purpose. How the boys had come to forget his cautious puzzled him, until he saw the dark face of Lazy Lupton grinning at him from beyond the bars. Then he knew. And his square jaws set firmly as he followed after the routing bull, touching it up with biting strokes of his rawhide quirt, driving the raging brute further away from the interested crowd.

He knew that the Open Hand men had little love for him. Knew that they would take particular delight in seeing him come to grief in any shape or form. Knew that Lazy Lupton had usurped the duty assigned one of the Falcon Ranch men with that particular end in view.

For himself he had no fears. He knew that he was competent to subdue even a mad beast like this, but he knew that the ugly brute was just as apt to charge the crowd as himself, and in the crush somebody might easily come to grief.

For that reason he sought to half-drive, half-tease the routing monster further away before tailing it. And after a few minutes of really admirable horsemanship, he succeeded.

Then he dropped his quirt and bent over to grip the muscular tail with his right hand before the bull could turn upon him—only to feel the stirrup-leather part beneath his weight, so unexpectedly that he was pitched headlong to the ground!

With a frightened snort his horse sprung aside to escape those cruel horns as the bull wheeled with a furious bellow, and before Pink Archer could spring to his feet, that ugly front was almost touching his breast.

Confused by the accident, partially stunned by the shock of falling head first to the dry ground, the foreman was still alert enough to grasp those polished horns, swinging his body aside with the same movement, trying to regain his footing.

Fiercer yet routed the savage creature, tossing high its head, swinging the foreman clear of the ground, even striking at him with a forefoot in its vicious rage.

Blinded with dirt and blood, Pink Archer felt his grip slipping along the smooth horns as the bull swung its mighty head from side to side, up and down. He knew that death was certain should he lose his hold, and life was full as dear to him as to most men. He tried to tighten his grip; tried to clear his eyes; to feel the ground firmly beneath his feet if only for an instant.

Even above the savage bellowing of the maddened bull, he could distinguish the excited cries from the distant spectators, but he could see

nothing, could not even know that help was coming on the wings of the wind. Swift though that was, it would be too late should his grip slip another inch or two—should those vicious plungings either cast him off or swing his body beneath those sharp hoofs.

Back by the mesa, mounted on her pet racer, Queen Nadine watched the deft maneuverings of the foreman as he worked the mad animal to a safe distance from the interested crowd. There was a warm flush on her cheeks, a bright glow in her lustrous eyes as she gazed with parted lips and heaving bosom. Then, if never before, Nash Whildon knew that the love of the woman whom he had sworn should become his wife, was all lavished upon the hated servant of her father.

With a vicious rage boiling within him, he was shifting his position to one nearer his love, when a sharp cry told of an accident. And before even his keen eyes could rightly comprehend what had happened, Queen Nadine was clear of the crowd and racing swiftly to the rescue!

She forgot that she was a woman—forgot the eyes upon her—forgot all save that the man whom she loved so fiercely, because almost hopelessly, was in peril of his life.

"I'll save him, or share his fate!" came pantingly through her lips as she dashed closer, revolver in hand.

Only to discard the weapon and grasp the jeweled haft of the dagger which rested in her bosom. Then—

Without touching rein she leaped from the saddle, one small hand grasping a polished horn, the other uplifted, to descend with the flashing blade, sending its keen point and double edge through hide and bone just back of the horns, severing the spinal cord. And as though stricken by lightning, the monster dropped dead in its tracks!

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

QUEEN NADINE was flung to the ground as the death-stricken animal plunged forward on its head, but with catlike activity she regained her feet, grasping her revolver and sending bullet after bullet into the curled front of the monster. This was needless. That one deft stroke had let out all life as surely as though the keen blade had dropped head from its trunk into the dust.

Nadine saw this, in another moment, and dropping her smoking weapon she sprung across to where Pink Archer had been flung as the mad bull plunged headlong, dropping to her knees at his side, catching his head in her arms, pressing it against her panting bosom as it lifted from the dirt, pressing her blanched lips to his blood-stained face.

"I'm all right—you shouldn't—"

With anything but flattering haste, Pink Archer freed himself and staggered to his feet, brushing a hand across his eyes to clear his vision, just in time to spring aside and escape being knocked down by the horse of Nash Whildon as the owner of the Open Hand Ranch rode up to the spot at the head of a score of others.

"Out of the way, you clumsy brute!" grated the rancher, with a vicious scowl as he leaped to the ground and stooped to raise Queen Nadine to her feet.

Had he faced his rival a single instant, a sturdy blow would have avenged that insulting address, but then Pink Archer turned away, glad to free himself from the gathering crowd, some curious, others thinly veiling their triumph at his downfall.

"Where's my horse? Where's—"

He saw the trembling, frightened creature in possession of the yellow-haired stranger who had introduced himself as Royal Hart, and with steps still far from steady, he moved in that direction.

"Not hurt, I trust, pard?" and there was a touch of friendly solicitude in the voice of the stranger as the words passed his lips.

"Shaken up a bit, but no worse, I reckon," faintly smiled the foreman, as he took possession of the horse and started to mount again.

A touch of the hand sent the spirited creature half-way around, bringing its left side toward the crowd now gathered about Queen Nadine. And then, with a hard, significant smile on his face, Hart said:

"A mighty smooth break, pard, don't you think?"

"Cut, by the eternal!" flashed Pink Archer.

"From the inside, where it wouldn't show, and three-fourths through both leathers. Ten pounds extra weight would snap it like rotten paper—did snap it, I should say!" added Royal Hart, keenly watching the changing countenance of the foreman as he fingered the smooth-cut edges.

"Looks like somebody wanted to get you out of their way, pard! And it isn't their fault if they failed, either!"

Pink Archer cast a swift glance around as though to make sure no other ears were within hearing, then muttered, earnestly:

"You're white, or your eyes lies, pard. Will you keep a still tongue about this, until I give you leave to talk?"

"You know what they'll say, of course," with a half-smile. "That you've forgotten how to ride!"

A short, hard laugh came from those lips in reply:

"Then they'll have to eat their words before the sun goes down."

"There's one voice won't be heard on the wrong side, any way."

Pink Archer glanced around, to catch sight of Queen Nadine moving through the crowd toward him, and though he knew that he owed his life to her plucky action, he was not ready to meet her eyes then and there. With a light spring he filled the saddle and dashed back toward the mesa, where he caught sight of Nellie Angell, with grim Sam by her side.

Among others, Colonel Hugh saw this movement on the part of his daughter, and quickly intercepted her, a harsh frown on his florid face and a menacing glow in his bloodshot eyes.

"Curb it, girl!" he grated, barely above his breath, so her keen ears alone could catch the words. "Think where we are—think who all are watching you! Curb it—or I will!"

Queen Nadine saw Pink Archer spring into the saddle and dash off toward the mesa, and plainly as though he had made full confession, she knew that it was purely to avoid her. A spasm of rage disfigured her beautiful face for an instant, and one hand shot up to her bosom where she habitually carried her dagger.

Only for an instant. Then she regained her wonted composure, and a gay, careless laugh parted her lips.

"Give me air, good people, unless you would witness an exhibition of swooning! My poor, poor nerves!"

"I wish I only had 'em!" enthusiastically cried one of the ranchers. "Got to do it, or bust! Three cheers and a tiger, gentlemen!"

The air was filled with hearty voices, and Queen Nadine, blushing, confused as a convent-reared girl at her first compliment from masculine lips, bowed her thanks, the very personification of modesty—to all outward seeming. Then, laughing lightly, her coquettish eyes sending hot thrills through many a bold heart, she said:

"You are heaping coals of fire upon my poor head, gentlemen, and showing me what a terribly unconventional act I have performed. As a lady, I should have covered my eyes and screamed in holy terror, at the very least, but—I didn't! I simply saw that Falcon Ranch was in a fair way of losing a very convenient foreman, and so—I humbly ask forgiveness of my sex, and forgetfulness from yours!"

With a half-mocking courtesy, Queen Nadine turned away toward her steed, accompanied by Hugh Falconer, whose face was harsh and angry as they drew further away from the company.

"Will you never get over acting the fool, girl?"

"Who was my teacher, father?" flashed Nadine, a dangerous light leaping into her dark eyes.

"The devil himself, I more than half believe!"

"One of his satellites, would sound more modestly, coming from your lips, father of mine!" with a low, mellow laugh that contrasted sharply with the fire which filled her jetty orbs. "But what have I done out of common, to stir you up so thoroughly? Was I to sit still and see a servant of yours butchered by a brute like that?"

"It wouldn't be more than his cursed clumsiness deserved if you had!" flashed the colonel, scowling blackly. "And after all the bragging I've done over his seat—that cuts deepest! Devil fly away with me this minute if I don't send him tramping to-morrow!"

"No you will not, father," with deliberate decision. "Pink Archer is far too good a man and servant to discharge for the fault of another. Why, you don't for an instant imagine that it was his fault that all this has happened? His stirrup-leather broke, and—"

"And you had to make an infernal idiot of yourself before the eyes of the whole country! There's dust and a speck of blood on your lips this minute—brush it off, but it's too late, girl!" with a hard and almost savage laugh. "It caught other eyes than mine—worse luck!"

"What of it! Who will dare even think twice of it to my face?"

Hard and fierce as his own tones sounded her voice just then, and Hugh Falconer instinctively flinched a little as he stole a side glance into her pale, set countenance. But he tried to hide his shakiness by still harsher words.

"Who, you ask? Will that Archer forget?"

"I hope not—I pray not!"

Barely loud enough to reach his ears. Strangely soft and musical the tones. Full of love the words, and the glance which turned toward the mesa was loving and tender as Angel Nellie herself could have given the lord of her pure heart.

Only for an instant did this softness last. Only long enough for Queen Nadine to distinguish two forms standing partially hidden by a clump of vine-wreathed bushes near the rock wall, apart from the company: the figures of Pink Archer and a woman—Nellie Angell.

Hugh Falconer followed her eyes, and he saw the same thing. It was just what he wanted most, for it gave him a favorable opening such as he had hardly dared hope for so soon.

"To laugh over it in company with that girl of Angel Sam! Ten to one he's telling her right now!"

"If I thought it—"

"Take it back, with a short, ugly laugh, as he covertly watched the changing countenance of his daughter. "I'd lose, sure! If the fellow is talking of love at all, be sure you are not the one whose praise his lips are sounding! But let him go, for now. I brought you over here for a little sober warning. Can you understand me?"

"Why not?" was the cold retort, as Queen Nadine turned her dark eyes upon his flushed face. "Am I an idiot? You mean about Whildon."

Hugh Falconer gulped down a sigh of relief. After all, his task might not be such a difficult one as he had feared. Nadine was not like other girls. No nonsense about her!

"He's dropped to our secret, some way, and unless we can stop his jaw, he'll make this section too mighty hot for our good healths!"

"What! not that—"

A broad palm hurriedly touched her red lips, and Falconer added:

"Just that! He spoke to me only a little while ago, and plainly put the case before me. Either we've got to pay his price, or all's up."

"And that price is—what?" coldly asked Nadine, her voice steady, but her face turning perceptibly paler as she waited for a reply.

"It might be worse, you know," hesitated Falconer, something like a flush of shame creeping into his face as his eyes shifted nervously. "He's well fixed. The two ranches join. And once—when you are his wife, it'll be to his interest as well as ours to keep dark."

Once more Queen Nadine glanced toward the mesa, where those two figures—now very near together—were still visible. A shade of bitter pain crept over her face, but with a hissing phrase in the tongue of her mother, she flung it off and averted her eyes.

"There is no other way, then? I am to pay the whole forfeit, then?"

"It hadn't ought to be so hard, girl. He's handsome, rich, respected; and he loves the very ground you trample on. While that Archer—"

Sharp and stinging a gloved hand crossed his lips, father though he was. And there was a dangerous glow in those great eyes as Queen Nadine spoke swiftly:

"Don't bring his name into a black mess like this, or I'll forget that you are my father! I warn you, once for all."

The colonel mechanically wiped his lips, but resented the stroke after no other fashion. He knew what a fiery temper he had to deal with, and what his child was capable of doing were she driven fairly beyond control.

"It's that or worse than ruin, child," he muttered hoarsely. "The insolent devil let me understand so much. If you throw him over, he'll blow all to the world, and that before we can take a single step to foil him. He said that only your hand as his wife would stop his jaw. That given, he would side with us to—remove all—obstacles."

Hugh Falconer had to force the words from his lips, as it were. But vague though they sounded, Nadine evidently comprehended his meaning.

"Go tell him to keep to himself this day, at least. Make him understand that I'll have so long a breathing spell. If not—then let him do the worst! Good man as they call him, I know a better! I know an arm that would strike him down at the first hint of wrong-doing on my part."

Almost unconsciously Nadine gazed once more toward the mesa, where Pink Archer was still standing with Angel Nell. There was more of sadness than of anger in her face just then, but a fierce rage leaped into her eyes as the soft, smooth voice of Nash Whildon uttered:

"A pretty pair of turtle-doves, surely! Would the disease were catching, and that you might—"

With a sharp, fierce cry, Queen Nadine whirled about, revolver in hand. And before the startled ranch-owner could lift a hand, she fired point-blank at the face of Nash Whildon.

CHAPTER VIII.

"LITTLE EARTHQUAKE."

NOTHING less swift than instinct could have saved the owner of Open Hand Ranch from death, that moment, for the turning and discharging were almost simultaneous on the part of Nadine Falconer.

There was no time to catch her wrist or to strike aside the weapon; no time even to comprehend her deadly impulse; and it was purely through an instinctive flinching that Nash Whildon escaped. As it was, the bullet and explosion carried the hat from his head and ruffled the blonde locks along his temple.

For a single instant it seemed as though the enraged woman would repeat the shot, this time with a surer aim, but as sharp ejaculations of surprise and half-anger came to her ears from the lips of those who still lingered near where the great bull had met its death at her hand, she lowered her pistol, a clear, ringing laugh is-

sued from her red lips, followed by the distinct, half-mocking words:

"Am I not Queen Nadine, recreant knight? Dare you address your sovereign with uncovered head?"

Loud enough to reach the ears of the ranchers who were starting toward the spot with drawn weapons, eager to avenge any possible insult or injury which might have been offered to her. Well enough feigned to thoroughly impose upon them, one and all. And then, in low, fierce tones that could be distinguished only by the startled, white-faced ranger, whose temple bore the black mark of burnt powder, Nadine added:

"Don't you dare crowd me too hard, Nash Whildon, or I'll shoot straighter next time! Keep your distance—and bridle your tongue!"

Until then Hugh Falconer had neither spoken nor moved, like one too completely dumfounded for action. But as he saw the ranchers coming toward the spot, he picked up the bullet-pierced hat, forcing a laugh as he thrust a finger through the hole, trying to crack a joke, but only showing his own agitation.

Nash Whildon, now icy cool as ever, took the hat from his hand and with a low bow to Queen Nadine, drew it far enough over his face to cover the reddening marks of the explosion.

Nadine drew back with a profound courtesy, smiling and laughing like one whose heart and brain never knew care or chagrin. Then she turned away and met the still excited ranchers, her tongue running glibly, yet her manner so natural that the last lingering suspicion was quickly banished from their minds.

"You took her by surprise, you see, pardner," muttered Falconer, with a little shiver of uneasiness as he noted the vivid, almost savage gleam which filled the blue eyes of the rancher as he watched and listened. "You didn't give me time to steady her, like. And—"

Nash Whildon turned upon the speaker with that vicious light deepening in his eyes, with his white teeth showing through the blood fringe overhanging those brightly red lips. Strong, reckless, iron-nerved man though he had long since won the reputation of being, Hugh Falconer shrunk back, almost cowering for an instant before that burning gaze.

With an effort he recovered, flushing hotly as he growled:

"What's got into you, anyway? What have I done that—"

"You didn't tell Nadine to take that pot shot, then?"

"Do you dare even hint as much?"

Nash Whildon laughed shortly, contemptuously.

"What I dare surpasses your limited comprehension, my good fellow. The hint was in your heart, if not upon your lips. But let that pass for now. You and I can't afford to come to an open rupture, while there is so much at stake."

"I don't want a row with you, of course," with a surly growl and a vicious side-glance. "But when you jump out at me with a hint of that sort, I've got to kick! I was doing my level best to fit your book, but as I told you, it might take time and patience before—"

"Let it be my time and patience, then," curtly interposed the owner of the Open Hand Ranch.

"You say you have broken the ice?"

"I've told the girl what you wanted—yes."

"Then consider yourself discharged from duty. I'll look after the rest, and win or lose through my own playing."

With a shrug of his broad shoulders Colonel Falconer watched the other as he turned and strode toward his horse, now grazing at some little distance. His face was schooled, but there was anything but a love-light in his reddened eyes as he growled in his throat:

"Satan stood by you then, you scoundrel! But will he always be so kind? Will you win the next trick? Not if I can stock the cards on you—not if you make even the slightest false step!"

Meanwhile Queen Nadine was playing her part to perfection, slowly moving back to where lay the slaughtered bull, with the jeweled haft of the doubled-edged dagger still showing brightly back of its horns. Only a passing reference to the shot she had fired, but sufficient to leave the impression on all minds that it was but another of her wild pranks to which all of her friends had long since grown accustomed.

With mock imperiousness she bade one recover her horse, another remove the dagger from its bloody sheath and cleanse it thoroughly, and still others dust her soiled habit with their kerchiefs. And entering merrily into her present mood, the ranchers served her right royally.

Thus surrounded, Nadine made her way back to the mesa, giving no sign as she saw those two figures still in partial concealment, still in close converse, though the sight sent a pang of fierce pain to her heart-core.

For a brief space she fought against temptation, but only to yield, as she ever did when trying to resist her evil half. A sharp touch of the gilt spur sent her scud bounding across to where Pink Archer was standing with Nellie Angell, and as they glanced around, half-startled, the beautiful amazon sprung lightly from the saddle, a smile upon her glowing lips.

"Am I so hideous, Miss Angell, that you tremble and look so frightened?" she cried, with a musical laugh, but with a look so bright, so strange, so close akin to fierceness that it drove the warm flush from the maiden's cheeks. "So sorry! If I only had a mask, for your sweet sake!"

"Have you any orders for me, Miss Falconer?" coldly interposed Pink Archer, seeming reluctant to permit Nellie to move from his side, even then. "If so—"

"No orders, but a request, my good friend," was the quick response, as Nadine reached his side, one gloved hand busy with her hair, the other gently, almost caressingly touching his broad breast.

"Do you know what the rabble out yonder are saying? Do you know how they are smiling and sneering over your downfall, over the humiliation of Falcon Ranch through its champion?"

"I neither know nor care," moving back a pace, with a side-glance toward Nellie, who was turning away to meet her father as Sam came toward them. "For myself, I mean, of course," with a slight flush at the ungracious sound of his own speech. "If they throw dirt at Falcon Ranch, let them take a look at my stirrup-leather."

"They say your own knife did the cutting—the idiots!" with a laugh that was almost vicious. "They say Falcon Ranch is weakening and seeking an excuse for defeat in the final test. Bah! it sickened me to listen, and I came here to warn you—to show the whole world how I scorn the base insinuations!"

"Look!" and she deftly pinned a scarlet bow upon his bosom, taken from her own jetty locks. "With this I elect you my knight. By this I adjure you to perform your devoirs right gallantly. Under my colors you must redeem your credit—in the eyes of the rabble: you have won, rather than lost any, in my estimation!"

Clear and distinct her voice rung out; audible not only to Nellie Angell, but to all those who were curiously watching her movements.

Pink Archer flushed hotly and seemed ill at ease, but what could he do? Not run away, though more than one who saw him then felt that he was strongly tempted to do so.

"You are my chosen knight, remember, Sir Arthur," gayly added Queen Nadine, one dainty gloved hand smoothing the bow upon his bosom, the other slipping through his arm as she slowly led him away, flashing a covert glance toward Nellie Angell as she added: "Do your devoirs gallantly, and your reward shall be—"

Her voice grew softer, inaudible to all save the foreman.

"Let her go, durn the critter," growled Angel Sam, as he led his daughter away. "An' we'll go, too! Durn the frolic! They ain't no fun into it fer the likes o' us, birdy. I'm too old, an' you—you're too young, an' true, an' tender-hearted fer the same air that sech as she breathes! We'll go back home, an' I'm fit to cuss the notion that tuck this trail, so I be, now!"

Nellie forced a laugh, the naturalness of which surprised the old man, and as a burst of merriment from near the corrals just then grew distinct, she turned the veteran in that direction, seeming as light-hearted as any joyous child.

"Little Earthquake!"

That curious title broke from a score lips, and amid general laughter nearly all who had been more or less only watching Queen Nadine and the young foreman, turned toward the corrals.

Not so much to see, after all: only a meek-looking broncho, standing in a clear space, with hanging head and drooping ears, with one eye closed and the other sleepily winking.

Royal Hart, by this time on admirable terms with the cowboys whom he had, only an hour before, faced with cocked revolvers, slowly walked around the meek animal, seemingly puzzled to account for the general interest. And even Red Clam, grave, dignified, looked around as though to ask an explanation.

"Is it alive, or just a stuffed animal?" asked Royal Hart, in a confidential whisper to the cowboy nearest him. "If it's an infernal machine, where's the fuse you touch off? Not that I'm too curious to wait the limit, but my nerves—I want time to stop my ears if there's any explosion on the programme!"

"Loaded? Waal, ef you doubt it, pard, jest hop into that saddle fer once!" grinned the cowboy.

"Won't need no tellin' fer to hop back ag'in!"

"Don't skeer the stranger fu'st-off, pards!"

"A rag baby could ride him from now till sundown!"

"Jump on, and show us how the old thing works, won't you?" asked Hart, to the last speaker. "If it is alive, I mean, of course."

The cowboy shook his head sadly. "Would ef I was saddle-wise, pard. Do it in a minnit, jest to 'bleege ye, but my private physician's shet down on my takin' any extry resks. Heart's willin' enough, but he says my constitution won't stand it. Tell ye what I will do, bein' it's you: I'll gree to pick ye up an' dust ye off when you come down ag'in!"

Royal Hart whistled softly, his brows arching

as he once more moved around the sleepy creature. He began to suspect the nature of the beast, but for the life of him he could hardly believe those suspicions. There was so little life about the broncho. It was so small, so loosely put together. The weight of a full grown man seemed enough to make the poor creature stagger and brace its thin legs to keep from being crushed to the ground.

"Straight good, pard!" half doubtfully, as he cast a keen glance around the grinning circle. "Sure it isn't the ghost of a bluff to turn a laugh against doubting strangers?"

"Heap laugh wropped up in that hide, but I ain't singin' jest what sort o' chune it's sot to," laughed the man addressed. "Don't take my word fer it, pard, but give it a whirl anyway, jest fer luck!"

"No charge for riding, then?" and the Bounding Buck drew nearer the sleepy-looking broncho.

"Not fer gittin' on, but fer gettin' off—"

"Prepare to snicker, then!" cried Hart, rising from the ground in a nimble spring that placed him in the saddle as by magic.

But that was all. Little Earthquake woke up. Just how it was done remained a puzzle to the keenest eyes, but an instant later the "Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow," was whirling through the air, heels up!

CHAPTER IX.

QUEEN NADINE'S CHAMPION.

JUST as a skillful acrobat whirls through the air leaving the springboard, so Royal Hart parted the atmosphere an instant after he struck the saddle worn by Little Earthquake.

End for end, and a double revolution went the Bounding Buck, finally alighting on his feet with a cat-like recovery, amid the roars of laughter from the throats of the convulsed spectators.

"Tetched the spring fu'st clatter, or I'm a howlin' liar right from Storyville!"

"Didn't know 'twas loaded!"

"Hold yer grips, fer the airtquake hes woke up fer keeps!"

Hardly the last, if the choking cowboy alluded to Little Earthquake. Just the effort necessary for hurling the degrading burden from its back, then the little broncho stood motionless, with drooping head and blinking eyes, with a slight quiver of its pendulous lips, as if sleepily smiling at the ridiculous figure cut by the audacious stranger who dared to doubt its powers.

"Be blamed ef he ain't goin' to try another whack!" cried a cowboy in surprise as Royal with slow, measured strides walked back to where the broncho stood so listlessly.

"Twenty-one feet, with an inch or two for good measure," calmly announced the sport, glancing mildly around at the grinning faces.

"Not quite up to expectations, but it will do for a starter. Who comes next? Who wants to be the first man to wipe out the pattern set by the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow? Don't hang back because the springboard is a little awkward to start from; the clumsiest among you will soon get used to it, if you only try often enough."

"I reckon we've done tried a-plenty, stranger," chuckled a cowboy. "They ain't a boy on the range as hain't bin throwed jest as clean as you was throwed jes' now."

"Thrown?" echoed Hart, with arched brows, the very picture of astonishment. "Is that it?"

"Wasn't you throwed, pard?"

"Ef they's any doubt in his mind, we're willin' fer him to try it 'nother whack!" grinned another of the company.

Royal Hart glanced soberly around the mirthful circle, his blue eyes opening more and more widely, like one whose brain is just beginning to pierce a mystery. And if he was not in sober earnest when he spoke, then he proved himself an admiral actor.

"That's the kind of a cat it is, eh? I heard somebody speak of a spring, and I thought I'd stumbled up against a new kind of patent. I was bit in a tender spot, for if there's any one thing I can do better than another, it's leaping—where crops out the Bounding Buck part of my cognomen, you see. And so—I set a pattern, touching it lightly at first, not to discourage you too soon. But if it's ridin'—"

"It is ridin', and part of the regular programme for the day," the voice of Colonel Hugh Falconer was heard, and accompanied by Pink Archer bearing a truly magnificent saddle, heavy weighted with silver ornaments, the ranch-owner stepped to the side of Little Earthquake.

"I don't need to touch on the merits of this bundle of springs and electricity," laughing softly as one hand patted the drooping head of the broncho. "The majority of you have seen him put through his paces, as far as any man has been able to test him on this range. I've tackled him, and bit dirt for my temerity. I've seen a score better riders give Little Earthquake a whirl, and though he never repeated his tricks, he got there all the same!"

"We are assembled here for sport and pleasure, and I've counted on Little Earthquake to

entertain us all—save those who try to back him! And as a salve to them, I've thought of this saddle. If any man can stick to Little Earthquake through the performance, the saddle is his reward. If all fail, those who make the venture can have the saddle to sell or win by lot, just as best suits them.

"The game is open, gentlemen. Who will be the first to enter?"

There was a brief silence, and many a rueful grin as though of disagreeable memories. Then one of the cowboys nudged Royal Hart.

"Go fer it, pard! Strangers hev the fu'st pick 'mongst white men!"

"Don't you want to see other jackets get dusted?" in the same guarded tones. "Time enough, if the critter is half what you claim. When the fun grows stale, I may chip in for the saddle. It looks worth winning, from here."

"Who gits it'll airn it double, you hear me preach."

"Falcon Ranch against the rest of the world!" came the clear, musical voice of Queen Nadine.

"I accept the challenge on behalf of the Open Hand," coldly responded Nash Whildon. "Hoping to meet defeat at such fair hands, of course," with an elaborate bow toward the fair amazon. "That would be sweeter than victory over any other adversary."

"A truce to compliments, Mr. Whildon. Produce your champion. Little Earthquake is going to sleep, and if your man is good as he should be, to pose as a champion, perhaps he can win before the broncho fairly wakes up. You see, I am so confident of winning that I give you every advantage possible."

There was just the suspicion of a sneer in the musical tones, but Nash Whildon showed no signs of annoyance as he bowed again.

"Your wish is my law, Queen Nadine."

At a wave of his hand, a small, wiry Mexican cowboy came shambling forward on bowed legs that had shaped themselves in the saddle from infancy. The men of Open Hand sent up a subdued cheer as they recognized the champion, for they knew that if any man on the ranch could conquer Little Earthquake, it was this same Mexican. And yet, more than one face clouded as its owner recalled the important act with which the tournament was to end: the test of skill between the picked men of the rival ranches.

"Tain't fer me to say," growled Lazy Lupton, surlily. "The boss is the boss, but ef I was in his boots I wouldn't be resking the bones of a picked man like Pedro, jest fer a saddle, with all that's to come!"

His comrade gave a knowing shrug, muttering:

"Tain't no saddle much as it is a wife, I reckon, pard!"

At a word from Colonel Falconer, the spectators fell back, leaving ample room for the performance. Only Nash Whildon and Pedro remained near the broncho. The ranch-owner whispered briefly in the ear of his champion, then sprang aside as the wiry Mexican leaped into the saddle.

With deft skill Pedro settled himself, feet in stirrups, all in an instant, but Little Earthquake never moved a muscle, its head drooping, its eyes sleepily blinking, its pendulous lips slightly shaking under the shock of the man's weight.

"Patience on a monument, smiling at grief!" gayly laughed Queen Nadine, with more malice than mirth, however.

She gained her end, for Nash Whildon sharply grated:

"Fan him, you ape! Fan him until he wakes up!"

And startled out of his wonted coolness, Pedro drove his long rowels viciously into those tucked-up flanks.

Only the one stroke; then Little Earthquake leaped forward double its length, as swiftly swaying to one side, to throw himself suddenly over, half turning while in the air.

Had Pedro not been "rattled" by that mocking laugh and savage command, he might have saved himself, even then. As it was, he lost his nerve with his coolness, and instead of alighting clear of the falling brute, he was caught beneath the broncho as it rolled over. Little Earthquake nimbly regained its feet, but the Mexican lay still, covered with dirt and sand.

Nash Whildon was at his side in an instant, but turned away with only a single look. If not dead, Pedro was senseless, and out of the race.

"Take him away, some of you fellows. If I had caught his breath before, I wouldn't have picked out a drunken lout for a champion. I owe you an apology, Miss Falconer, and admit the Open Hand's defeat."

"I never take what I have not earned, thanks," with a cold nod. "My champion is ready; you, Mr. Archer!"

The young foreman bowed gravely. He had anticipated as much, after what had passed, and though he by no means coveted the honor, he did not see how he could decline it if offered. He believed that Nadine was actuated mainly by a generous wish to give him a chance to silence all ungenerous slurs against his skill as a rider, born of that treacherously cut stirrup-leather. And then, he was really a servant,

subject to her orders fully as much as the lowest employee on the ranch.

In silence he entered the ring as Pedro was borne out of it by Lazy Lupton and another. Not a muscle of his face altered as he caught the tenor of the eager betting—or offers to bet, rather. For long as were the odds offered on Little Earthquake, no one seemed inclined to back the rider. Not even Nadine Falconer, for she came riding across the ring to where her champion stood beside the broncho, her beautiful face lighted up, her dark eyes glowing vividly as she bent over in her saddle, her red lips almost brushing his bronzed cheek as she murmured:

"Remember—you bear my colors—you are my chosen champion! Conquer Little Earthquake, and you win more than the saddle—you win his mistress for life!"

A sudden light came into the face of the young foreman as he drew back his head, his voice ringing out clear and distinct:

"I will do my level best, Miss Falconer. If I fail, I swear to resign both the offered reward and my position to a better man!"

He did not stop to note the ghastly pallor that came into the face of Queen Nadine, to note the fierce rage that filled her eyes at his clear tones, lending the words a double meaning, one of which she alone could rightly interpret.

With a graceful spring Pink Archer alighted in the saddle, the reins firmly grasped in his left hand. And as Little Earthquake bounded viciously forward and sideways, Queen Nadine drew back to leave her champion a clear field.

Alighting stiff-legged, the broncho shook himself violently for a moment as though hoping to thus relieve his back of that disliked weight. Failing in this, he darted straight ahead, away from the mesa, Pink Archer yielding to his every motion, seemingly limp and boneless down to the saddle seat. Straight on for a hundred yards at top speed, to stop short with feet planted firmly for an instant, then rearing up and falling backward swift as thought.

An involuntary cry parted the lips of Queen Nadine, but was as instantly checked as she saw the rider safely on his feet, ready to leap into the saddle the moment Little Earthquake regained its feet.

That was immediately, but none too rapidly for the cool, steady-nerved foreman, who seemed resolved to win if he could. When the broncho rose, it bore its rider.

Queen Nadine smiled in triumph as she glanced toward Nash Whildon, but he seemed unconscious of her look. White and stern, looking far older than usual, he was watching the struggle as though his every hope in life depended on the result.

Bucking like a bewildered deer, Little Earthquake bounced back and forth, now whirling around in a dizzying circle, now making cat-leaps to and fro, crouching down only to arch its back and try to hurl its rider into the air.

Time and again he was rolling on the ground in a cloud of dust, seeking to crush the man or break free from his steady grip, only to meet with repeated defeats. Again he darted forward at full speed, as though about to repeat his first performance, but instead of stopping short and falling over backward, he struck his nose against the ground and turned a clean somersault forward!

And as the eager watchers saw Pink Archer coolly regain his seat, a wild, enthusiastic cheer fairly rent the heavens.

It was glorious! This was well worth coming to see, even if—

The cheer suddenly died away, for Little Earthquake was still unconquered, still fighting against defeat like a veritable demon. And then, as he again flung himself backward, a simultaneous breath that was almost a groan burst from the crowd. And a shrill voice cried out:

"Now he has got it, fer keeps!"

Pink Archer was pinned down by the body of the broncho!

CHAPTER X.

A POINTED DEFIANCE.

A THRILL ran through the breathless crowd: a thrill of horror to some, of bitter anguish to at least one, of vicious exultation to the master of Open Hand Ranch if no others.

The broncho had fallen so differently from either time before, simply rearing up and toppling over backward, with its long neck bent forward between its knees, so that the massive saddle would receive the first and greatest shock, provided the rider was adroit enough to fall clear of the trap. On each occasion up to this, Pink Archer had swung clear of the saddle, dropping deftly to his feet, watchful and ready to resume his position the instant the broncho tried to regain his feet.

But even through the cloud of dry dust kicked up by those hoofs, all who gazed could see the young foreman had met with some mishap. And after the first breathless instant, it looked as though Pink Archer had been pinned to the ground by the saddle-bow, driven through his body by the weight of the broncho itself!

That one startling cry—then Queen Nadine drove her spur jewels deep into the quivering

flank of her horse, dashing toward the fallen champion with blazing eyes, with face so pale as to be ghastly, gripping a revolver as she sped along.

Little Earthquake, after a brief kicking and tumbling on its back, rolled over to one side, but made no attempt to arise. It seemed to know that the victory was won, but as it had been given the hardest battle of its life, so it seemed resolved to reap all possible revenge.

Hugh Falconer uttered a warning yell as he saw Nadine, revolver in hand, but cut his cry short as Nash Whildon gained his side, gripping an arm with fingers that seemed to fairly meet in the flesh, hissing:

"Shut! Let her shoot! What's a broncho, when—"

He did not end the sentence, for it was unnecessary. Their evil eyes met, and Falconer divined the rest: with her shattered nerves, Nadine was as apt to strike human as beast with her shots.

But it was not to end after that fashion. Swift as was the snorting steed ridden by the queen of the tournament, there was one still more fleet carrying a yellow-haired sport, and just as Nadine came near enough to risk a shot, Royal Hart dashed in front of her, keeping in line until the great black horse shot past the broncho, leaving its master behind.

Without checking his horse in the slightest, the Bounding Buck leaped to the ground and catching Little Earthquake by the tail and one hind leg, jerked him aside with one superhuman effort. And just as Nadine came dashing up, second to reach the spot, Royal Hart was lifting the young foreman to his feet, with a cheery laugh:

"Only a tailor wound, or I'm a sinner—and that's a powerful oath! Don't say I've played the idiot too big, pard! Chipping in when you were only giving Little Earthquake a breathing spell in mercy! If that's so, I'll go hunt a grasshopper to kick my brains out with!"

A gloved hand almost struck him a blow on the chest as Queen Nadine sprung from the saddle, her face still pale as death, but with a glad, hopeful light chasing that look of frozen horror away.

"You are not killed—you are not—thank kind Heaven!"

Few young men could have done it, but Pink Archer shrunk plainly from the beautiful creature who was so openly betraying the mad love with which he had inspired her. He bowed coldly, but declined the trembling hand that was extended.

"I am unworthy, Miss Falconer, since I have failed to uphold your cause as it should ever be sustained."

"You are worthy!" impetuously began Nadine, twin spots of vivid color flashing into her creamy cheeks, to break off short as she saw Pink Archer step back a pace, his hand removing the dusty knot of scarlet ribbon from his breast.

For the first time Pink Archer lifted his eyes to those of the woman who loved him so madly. His own were cold and steady as the tone in which he spoke:

"I did what I knew how, as in duty bound, Miss Falconer, under your commands, as a servant of the ranch. I failed to uphold its reputation, and having failed, I keep the pledge I gave in return for your unlucky choice; I resign both your colors, and my situation as foreman."

There was more in his manner than in the words, to Queen Nadine, as he stepped forward, bowing humbly as he placed the scarlet gage in her trembling hand—that same hand whose muscles had driven the bright steel through the spine of the maddened bull to save his life only a short time earlier in the day.

She knew then, what she would not before acknowledge, that she had lost where she hoped to win; that the love she craved so madly, almost insanely, would never be hers.

Instantly all tremor vanished, and her queenly figure drew erect as those cold words met her ear. She said nothing. She dared not trust her voice just then, lest it too plainly betray her fierce chagrin.

Luckily for her, there came an impetuous interruption just at that moment. From the colonel, who pressed through the interested circle, his voice hasty, his florid face redder than ever.

"None of that, Archer! Resign—but I'll not accept your resignation, man! Just now—when Falcon Ranch needs her picked men more than ever? Are you crazy, man alive?"

The colonel was plainly in earnest, for the moment forgetting how recently he had expressed a savage desire to get rid of this very man, even at the cost of criminal means.

The young foreman flushed with brief pleasure at this bluff testimonial, and as the men of Falcon Ranch broke out in a wild, prolonged cheer, ringing the changes on his name and his merits until their breath failed them, he stood silent, blushing like a very lad beneath unexpected praise. And into his brown eyes came a dewy mist that shadowed the face and figures before him.

"You hear, man?" laughed the colonel, clapping him heartily on his shoulder, gripping a

hand with vigor at the same time. "Does that sound like good-by? Do you think the lads are howling after that fashion for joy at thought of another foreman? Get out, you! I'll have nothing of the sort, I tell you! The man don't live who can break in Little Earthquake, and you gave him the toughest tussle of his life!"

Pink Archer stood silent until the colonel ceased through scantiness of breath, then he spoke, gravely, resolutely:

"You heard what I said when Miss Falconer so unfortunately picked me out as the champion of Falcon Ranch, colonel. I knew it was a bad choice, but as a servant I dared not try to get out of it. Then and there I took a vow to resign if I failed. I have failed. I have run up against a horse that I can't ride, and a man who does that has no business acting as foreman on a ranch like yours. I resign, with or without your leave, sir."

"But just as I need you most?"

"If you wish, I'll serve the day out, of course," with more cordiality in voice and manner.

"Isn't this making heap row over mighty little cause, colonel?" called out Nash Whildon, moving his horse nearer the inner circle. "Let the fellow slide. It's time to quit riding when he loses his nerve. Let him slide, and I'll fill his place with a ten times better man, until you can do better."

There was an instinctive division among those who were closest to the speaker as he uttered these cold, contemptuous sentences. A waving back on either side, such as one will see in a crowd when lead is expected to get in its deadly work.

Falconer turned his face with a frown, but as he encountered that cold, yet burning glance, he flushed hotly and drooped his eyes. Once more he looked like a slave who had unexpectedly met his master.

Pink Archer never even glanced toward the speaker, though the gray shade that shot over his bronzed face was evidence that he heard and rightly interpreted that insolent interruption. He added, as evenly as though nothing had interrupted his speech:

"All I wished to make clear was this, colonel: It is my business to ride. As foreman over them, the boys naturally look to me as an example for their imitation. Since I have made a wretched failure in public, can I still hold that position? You say yes, but I say no! I'll serve you to the best of my ability until this business is over, then I must insist upon your accepting my resignation."

He bowed respectfully to his employer, then stepped swiftly past the colonel, his brown eyes glowing hotly as they gazed squarely into the handsome face of the Open Hand owner, his voice clear and cutting:

"Now I'll talk to you, Nash Whildon. Will you kindly repeat the words you spoke a moment ago?"

Queen Nadine turned with a partly outstretched hand as though to interfere, but then paused short. She saw that Pink Archer made no motion toward drawing a weapon; saw his hands resting easily at his side, even while the ranch-owner sat his horse with right hand doubled up and supported akimbo, in convenient proximity to his revolver.

She saw that the young foreman was cool and steady as fate itself, and she knew that so long as this lasted, even Nash Whildon would not dare attempt to use a weapon.

The owner of the Open Hand stifled a yawn as he drawled:

"Is your memory so short, my good fellow?"

Pink Archer curled a lip at the covert sneer, and coldly added:

"Shall I save you the trouble? You hinted that I had lost my nerve, because I failed to stick on a broncho you are too cowardly to even attempt to back. You offered to fill my place with a better man."

"Which offer still holds good," nodded Whildon.

"I am still in harness, still a servant on Falcon Ranch while this day lasts. While not claiming to be the best man among those thus employed, I am ready to uphold its honor against all comers from beyond its bounds. Narrowing the circle down to Open Hand, I can speak with much more confidence, and without laying myself open to the suspicion of boasting when I say that I'm ready and eager to meet and conquer the best man it has on its list, from lowest herder down to its master, Nash Whildon himself!"

Icy cold though Nash Whildon prided himself on being, this last sentence cut him to the quick. He turned white as ashes, and his eyes shone as though the sockets were filled with living fire. His right hand dropped to the butt of a pistol, but before it could do more, Queen Nadine sprung between the men, her right hand clinched and uplifted in almost fierce warning, her voice ringing out sharp and commanding:

"Is this the place and time for burning powder? Where is your hand, Nash Whildon?"

"Wholly at your service, Miss Falconer," bowed the ranch-owner, removing the offending member, bowing low in the saddle.

"See that you put it to no worse use, then."

with a short, hard laugh that imposed on very few who heard its notes. "This is a day of peace, or so intended. The man who breaks that peace, is no gentleman, to say the very least. Not particularly to you do I address my words, but to one and all, singly and collectively," she added hastily.

"For which pray accept my humble thanks," blandly smiled Whildon.

Queen Nadine turned abruptly toward the young foreman, just in time to arrest his steps in retreat. With a deft, rapid motion she once more pinned the scarlet knot upon his breast, above his heart.

The action was performed before Archer fairly comprehended her purpose. One hand partially rose to tear off the badge, but his hand swept back as Queen Nadine spoke rapidly:

"You are still a champion, until another surpasses your record, Pink Archer. You are still the pick of Falcon Ranch, and as such," with another swift turn and pointed bow toward Nash Whildon, "I stand ready to back you against all comers! Ay! to the last horn and hoof on Falcon Ranch—and give you the choice of tests, noble sir!"

Once more cool and steady to all outward seeming, the ranch-owner bowed his head, a bland smile playing about his lips as he looked up to meet that burning gaze. And softly, meekly came the words:

"That settles it, and I humbly confess my mistake. You have spoken; and—the queen can do no wrong!"

CHAPTER XI.

AROUND THE FESTIVE BOARD.

"THANK the Lord!" bluntly ejaculated Colonel Falconer as, just at that moment, the notes of a horn rung loudly across the plain, coming from the lips of Ebony Tom, standing on the rock wall of the mesa. "Dinner is ready, and I reckon we've had breeze enough to give us all a good appetite. The ladies are looking and waiting for you, gentlemen!"

To more than the colonel this interruption was a welcome one. On such an occasion few relish a squabble, and with marvelous celerity the gathering broke up, hastening back to the mesa where the large majority of the fair guests were stationed, through choice or from necessity.

Nash Whildon politely offered Queen Nadine his escort, and she smilingly accepted it. Both were ashamed of their recent heat, and were glad of a chance to show that it was only a passing ebullition which really meant nothing.

Royal Hart paused to whisper a few words to Pink Archer, then, with Red Clam following like a shadow, he joined the main company about the festive board.

Such it proved, in reality.

Colonel Falconer had determined to make the event one to be remembered for all time, and had spared nothing that could possibly lend success to the occasion. For weeks he had been making his arrangements for the day, spending gold like water, and the result bade fair to fully equal his most sanguine expectations.

Nimble hands had set up tables and decorated them, while the sport went on below. There was room for all, even down to the humblest employee on the grounds, though these were a little removed from the seats occupied by the ladies. Still, even the most jealous could not even draw an insult from this, for the arrangements otherwise were identical.

The tables were spread with snowy drapery. Here and there were scattered silverware; little oases of gleam and glitter amid the glass and chinaware—more than half of those present had ever beheld on any other single occasion.

The cooks had done their duty, and everything was neatly served.

Ebony Tom, at the head of an efficient staff, took care to keep all fully supplied, not only with food but generous vintage as well. Sparkling champagne for the ladies and others who preferred it; whisky for the stronger heads and more seasoned palates. And a guest had only to whisper his choice, for a light-footed, nimble-handed waiter to supply his wants, extravagant or simple.

During the first few minutes Colonel Falconer covertly, anxiously observed his guests, but this did not last long. From the very first hum of gratified surprise, it was plain to be seen that none there had even the ghost of a fault to find. And satisfied that, thus far, at least, his venture was a complete success, the colonel gave himself over to feasting and chatting gayly with his guests.

A clear-witted observer might have noted many a contrasting phase in the scene, and some of which bade fair to produce disagreeable fruit before the next setting of the sun.

Nadine Falconer, as the acknowledged queen of the tournament, was seated at the head of the main table, on the right hand of her father. To her left was Parker Mandrake, installed in the place Nash Whildon sought to claim, but which Nadine laughingly denied him with:

"Nay, my gallant cavalier, we are still rivals, you must remember, and none such can find a

welcome near my throne. It is an armed truce between you and I, until after the great passage of arms. Then—"

"Then I will present my humble petition to your Majesty," with a low bow, more to hide the evil gleam that shot in and out of his eyes than from a desire to carry out the merry pretense.

"Then—I will listen or stop my ears, just as sweet fancy dictates, gentle sir," laughed Nadine, turning to her chosen cavalier.

As the feast progressed, Queen Nadine was never more gay and brilliant. Her eyes flashed and glittered like diamonds. A soft flush tinged the creamy purity of her cheeks. Her lips were red as sun-kissed cherries. And cool-headed, steady-nerved veteran though Mandrake prided himself on being, her gracious demeanor set his brain in a whirl, and he pledged her glass for glass.

If Nadine glanced across the mesa to where Pink Archer was seated in company with Sam Angell and his daughter Nellie, her eyes were too swift for even Nash Whildon to intercept them.

Grave, cold, silent, wholly unlike his usual self, the owner of Open Hand Ranch paid far closer attention to the queen of the feast than to either food or drink. At times a half-smile lifted his drooping mustache as he noted how rapidly Nadine emptied her glass. He saw that her gayety was almost wholly artificial, though so admirably disguised to all ordinary observers. He knew that she was suffering ten-fold his own torments and he was just malicious enough to secretly rejoice over the fact.

He looked often toward Pink Archer, his eyes glowing with mingled emotions as he saw how tenderly devoted the young foreman was to fair Nellie Angell.

It may have been chance that led Royal Hart to take a seat close to the one occupied by the Open Hand owner, and it may have been nothing more than chance that caused the Bounding Buck to mark those looks expended in the direction of the young foreman. But it was hardly chance that led the yellow-haired sport to openly comment upon them, as he did after a bit.

"Hope you don't envy the young fellow, pard?"

A hot flush came into the face of the rancher as he turned to frown upon the speaker, but the terrors of that scowl were lost, since just then Royal Hart was busied with his plate.

"Were your words addressed to me, sir?" coldly asked Whildon.

"Just to keep my jaws going while I carved another mouthful, you see," smiled the sport, with a side glance and confidential nod. "Never could bear to waste a moment. Got to keep going. Born that way, I reckon! Full of electricity, soul, body and tongue!"

"Especially the last," sneered Whildon.

"Glad you think so," with a bland nod and broader smile. "Everybody ain't built that way—worse luck for them! Wouldn't be so many clumsy speeches made, if they were. For instance: I fairly shuddered when I heard you lay yourself open for the keen thrust Queen Nadine gave you down yonder; I did, really."

Whildon bowed stiffly, his blue eyes gleaming dangerously, smooth and even though his words came in response:

"Sorry to have shocked you so horribly, sir. It is a way I have, when the wind is in the east. Perhaps you would be safer were you to change your location for a few days?"

"After coming so far to join in the sports?" with widely opening eyes, a delicate morsel halting midway to his lips.

"Our loss might prove to be your gain, you understand?"

Royal Hart made sure of the tidbit before making reply, and there was just the shadow of scorn in his smooth tones as he finally spoke:

"That may be true, too, though you hardly intend me to swallow it after that fashion. Honestly speaking, I came here with heap bigger expectations than I now anticipate carrying away again. I heard so much down-country about the horsemen of this favored section; heard so often that no ordinary man could hold a tallow dip to their electric light; that, do you know, I actually expected to learn a few wrinkles by taking this little trip—I did, for a humiliating fact."

"And now?" purred Whildon, smiling icily.

Royal Hart cast a half-apologetic glance toward Pink Archer, and lowered his voice just a trifle as he responded:

"Mind you, I'm not saying a word against your men, as men. All I do say is this: If the fellows I've seen put forward as champion riders are really among your best, then I've had my trouble for my pains. I could have learned more by staying at home."

"Where you are classed among the champions, of course?"

"If Red Clam wasn't actually a clam, so far as human speech is concerned, I'd bashfully refer you to him for an answer to that query," laughed the Bounding Buck. "As he is rightly named, and as there isn't another representative of my stamping grounds within easy reach, I'll choke down my natural modesty and reply—no, sir! There can be but one champion, and I'm that modest individual."

More blandly than ever smiled Nash Whildon, as he gently asked:

"At home, of course? But up here? We have a few champions, in a modest way; one of them you have seen, in Little Earthquake."

"Just such as I train my little boys on," coolly emptying a glass.

Then Nash Whildon flashed out in almost savage earnest:

"Talk is cheap, but acting is another thing. Dare you try to back Little Earthquake—again?"

"And time and skill is worth money, you ought to add. Could I coax you to back your champion with any of your good money?"

"Five hundred dollars that you can't stick to Little Earthquake for ten minutes!" sharply cried the ranch-owner, in tones that startled the entire company, as he slapped his wallet on the table before him.

"Money talks, and in accents far sweeter than even grub like this!"

CHAPTER XII.

RIDING AN EARTHQUAKE.

As the words passed his lips, Royal Hart dropped a fairly plump note-book by the side of the ranch-owner's wallet on the table, adding:

"It's one of my merits to never miss a good thing because a better offers, provided I can surround 'em both just as easy as one. Will you see if I've got dingbats enough to clinch your bet, while I lay in a pound or two more ballast? Awful cheeky, isn't it?" with a little laugh, as Whildon curled a lip. "But you don't seem to be hungry, and I feel as though I hadn't eaten a bite for six weeks!"

As coolly, as business-like as though ignorant of the fact that the eyes of all within earshot were eagerly fixed upon him, the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow resumed his meal, eating like one thoroughly appreciative of the good things which were set before him.

Cold and silent Nash Whildon waited, the two wallets lying untouched on the table before him. His thin lip was slightly curled, but there was a half-troubled light in his blue eyes from time to time: a faint wrinkling of his brows like one trying to recall a forgotten past: as he stole occasional side-glances at the bronzed face of the yellow-haired sport from the lower country.

Of all who listened, none showed keener interest than Queen Nadine herself, and from that time until the ending of the feast, Parker Mandrake found himself at liberty to follow his own sweet will.

Royal Hart was still feeding when Queen Nadine arose from the head of the table, but the mute signal was not lost upon the stranger.

"Good enough—and enough is good as a feast, to all except an animal whose every-day name shall never be mentioned by lips of mine in such choice company as the present. And now, gentle pilgrim, unless your mental backbone has weakened, we'll proceed with our little gambling operation: the joyous amusement of heads I win, tails you lose!"

He picked up his wallet, opening it and with a deft motion of his nimble fingers, set the ends of numerous banknotes fluttering tantalizingly before the eyes of the rancher.

"You heard my offer to back Little Earthquake, sir," stiffly retorted Whildon, rapidly selecting a number of notes from his wallet and dropping them on the table. "Cover the money. Stick to the broncho for ten minutes, and you take the pile."

"That is pie, and I just dote on pastry!" laughed Royal Hart as he covered the amount with a like sum, holding the notes down with the tip of a shapely finger. "Sorry for you, pard, but I'm a man of business, you see, and one of my rules is to always make expenses when I can. And, as a business man, I'd feel just a little more at ease about the future of this wealth if you would kindly select some responsible person as a temporary safety vault, to—"

"Do you think I can fill the bill, my dear sir?" smiled Queen Nadine, gliding forward, her cheeks flushed, her eyes all aglow. "Will I be permitted to act as stakeholder?"

Royal Hart looked and acted like one literally stricken dumb by such unexpected condescension. With a profound bow he placed the notes in the queen's hand, and in very meek, subdued tones ventured:

"Would it be presuming too far were I to beg your Majesty to name the time and decide upon all the little preliminaries for—"

"There is no time like the present, and out yonder stands Little Earthquake," sharply interposed Whildon, turning on his heel.

Queen Nadine flashed a glance after him, but said nothing until she once more gazed keenly into the really handsome face of the yellow-haired sport from the lower country. What she saw there gave her restored confidence, but she said, almost gently:

"If you prefer a delay, for any reason, sir, you have only to mention it. My power extends that far, at any events!"

Royal Hart smiled blandly, his speech smooth and fluent:

"As a man of business, it's a rule of mine to make sure of a speculation just as soon as circumstances will permit. As a member of the

humane society, whose motto is the prevention of cruelty to animals, I'm in duty bound to put the gentleman out of his misery as speedily as possible. The sooner I get to work, the less time he'll have to waste in vain hopes that a broken neck may save his filthy lucre!"

"You wouldn't mind investing a trifle more on the same terms, my dear fellow?" blandly whispered Parker Mandrake, with a hand suggestively upon his pocket.

Queen Nadine sharply interposed.

"I forbid any further betting on this match!" she cried, with a frown that emphasized her words. "The man who offers to do so, may consider himself an enemy of mine from that instant!"

Her word was law to all within hearing of her voice, on that point, at least. Only Royal Hart would have put up money against Little Earthquake, and as he humbly bowed his submission to the queen, that branch of the subject was closed once for all.

Cool, business-like, just as though he had not even the shadow of a doubt as to the ultimate result, Royal Hart left the mesa and passed out over the level, where the bucking broncho was standing at ease, apparently none the worse for the tough struggle he had so recently passed through.

Royal Hart laughed softly as he noted the eye nearest to him opening with a sly side-glance that lasted only an instant.

"Taking stock, are you, beauty?" he smiled as one hand slipped through the bridle to lead the sleepy-looking creature back nearer the mesa. "Not so much to look at, am I? But wait until you feel me in the saddle, and if you don't recall the fable of the singed cat, I'm mixing up a mighty mess of grief for my own delectation!"

This could hardly be termed boasting, since there were no human ears near enough to catch his words.

Dropping the rein when a few yards away from the great group of spectators, Royal Hart quickly, deftly prepared for the contest of man against brute. There was little to do, but the manner in which he set about it, told those who watched, this stranger was no novice in the saddle.

He gave Red Clam his belt of weapons, his coat and hat. He knotted a silk kerchief tightly about his head, protecting his eyes from the long yellow curls. He changed his spurs for another pair with longer, stronger rowels. He looked to bridle and saddle, satisfying himself both fore and rear cinch were firmly fastened.

"A good deal of fuss and feathers for a past master in the art of riding, isn't it?" sneered Nash Whildon, at length.

"Simply to let you down easy, dear fellow," bowed Royal Hart, with a light laugh that cut more deeply than an angry retort. "Just a bit of salve to your pride in your champion Earthquake. Your good money is gone, of course, but I'll make believe I had to work hard to win it!"

As the last words left his lips, the man leaped lightly into the saddle, settling himself as by magic, though Little Earthquake lost not a second of time in beginning the struggle to unseat this bold rider.

Despite the fact on which Colonel Falconer had dwelt in his introductory speech, the broncho pursued much the same tactics by which he had already conquered two picked horsemen, racing ahead, only to stop short with a backward fall, or sudden flinging up of his hind parts, supplemented by cat-leaps from side to side, with an occasional bound high into the air, or still more artistic bucking.

Even at this early stage of the contest it was plain to those experienced hands whose eyes so eagerly watched and followed each change and shifting, that this yellow-haired sport was no ordinary horseman.

If he had a fault, it seemed to be that of over-confidence in himself and his skill. If anything, he seemed entirely too much at ease!

"That will throw him, if anything!" muttered Parker Mandrake.

"Now comes the tug of war!" cried Queen Nadine, as Little Earthquake suddenly subsided for a brief space, his head drooping listlessly as though the creature was on the point of falling asleep. "If the fellow is caught napping—"

Royal Hart sat in the saddle, seemingly loose-jointed and limp as a piece of buckskin. Both horse and rider looked as though on the point of falling asleep.

Then—Little Earthquake uttered a most unearthly squeal, arching his back like a bow and bringing his feet close together beneath his body as he "bucked" high into the air, seeking to shake the seat of his rider. But limp as the man seemed, he never rose an inch from the saddle, and as the broncho came to the ground with every joint stiff and unyielding, a savage jerk forced its head up, the long rowels rake! the hide along its ribs, and the heavy quirt whistled swiftly from side to side across its withers.

Little Earthquake was not used to such sharp punishment. Since his evil reputation became firmly established, those who ventured to mount his back had confined themselves to retaining

their seat as long as possible, feeling that they had more than enough to do to remain on the defensive. And this punishment seemed to drive the vicious brute fairly wild with rage and fury.

Its squeals were more unearthly than ever. It kicked up behind until, despite the strong reins and stronger grasp upon them, its bared teeth could reach the ground.

It tore up the turf in mouthfuls, then reared aloft, flinging the frothy mixture over itself and rider. It rushed swiftly ahead, only to bound backward the next instant, leaping to one side or the other the second its hoofs touched earth again, shaking itself until the saddle rattled loudly. It fell backward, only to find the man in the saddle as quick as it tried to regain its feet. It plunged headlong, rolling over and over, with the same result. It whirled round and round in short circles, abruptly reversing, or else shooting to one side with a slip and a shake.

The stipulated ten minutes had long since expired, but no one thought of calling time. All were too intensely absorbed in the thrilling exhibition of skill and stubbornness for that. Even Nash Whildon drew his breath rapidly, his eyes aglow, all thoughts of loss fled from his mind; even he forgot all chagrin in his admiration for such matchless skill.

His body swaying to and fro to suit the swift, erratic motions of Little Earthquake, but his lower limbs clinging as snugly to place as though they formed part of the animal he was bound to subdue, Royal Hart attended strictly to business. His steel-like grip kept the head of the broncho well up. His strong spurs at each leap and bound raked first one side then the other, until the red blood sprinkled the torn-up ground. The hide-bound handle of his quirt more than once knocked Little Earthquake back as he attempted to fall backward. And the cutting lash, by a scarcely perceptible movement of that flexible wrist kept hissing from side to side, stinging the animal to still more furious plungings.

Until now the broncho had been given time at spells for brain-working, for those who ventured to back him were ordinarily glad enough to accept even the briefest truce, forgetting that by so doing they were lessening their own chances of ultimate success. But now the mad broncho had no time for devising new tricks. Under spur and lash he was driven to insane fury, and being so coolly met at each crook and turn, every outburst was surely bringing the end nigher.

As often as he attempted to pause, even for an instant, his rider mercilessly forced him into renewed struggles. Cruel as this may seem, it was really merciful, and the spectators who watched the contest were well aware of the fact. They had seen enough to know that, barring an accident to saddle or bridle, the yellow-haired stranger must surely conquer in the end. And granting this, the quicker he could bring Little Earthquake to realize as much, the less the broncho would suffer.

Another desperate struggle; another break-neck plunge headlong, rolling over and over, lashing out with every hoof as though hoping to thus disable the cool sport who fell upon his feet, who still maintained his grip on the bridle, ready to resume his seat the instant his antagonist sought to arise; then Little Earthquake gave one sharp squeal of savage rage—after which he lay motionless, save for his rapidly-heaving flanks and quivering muscles.

And Royal Hart coolly seated himself on the side of the conquered broncho, striking a match and lighting a cigar with careless grace.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE QUEEN'S NAME!

WITH a united cheer, amidst which could be distinctly heard the clear, musical notes of Nadine Falconer, the enthusiastic spectators surged forward, only to draw rein abruptly as Royal Hart leaped to his feet, imperiously motioning them back as he cried:

"Keep your distance, good people, until the circus is over, if you please!"

"You have won—don't torture the poor brute and further!" came sharply from the red lips of Queen Nadine as she drew rein.

"I'll be merciful as Little Earthquake will permit, but I never leave a job half jobbed, your Majesty," with a cool bow that pointed his words. "I've broken his spirit; I'll break him so a lady can ride and guide him with a rein of gossamer, if you only grant me time."

"You have won the right to command, and we obey," laughed Queen Nadine, waving back the more ardent of her guests. "After all, it is no more than justice. Little Earthquake has had a long day, and the proudest must acknowledge a master some time!"

"I am glad to hear you admit so much, Nadine!" muttered Nash Whildon, bending forward until his blonde mustaches brushed her ear.

"That master must prove himself a man, and you are conceding my good horse to be one, the queen, my gentle cavalier!"

Flushing hotly, the master of Open Hand Ranch reined his steed back a few feet, biting

his lip sharply as he interpreted the real intent of that broken sentence. For only too well he knew that Nadine meant an entirely different ending from the one she had given it, with a pause just long enough to tip the shaft with poison.

Royal Hart, taking it for granted that he was to have his own way, turned to Little Earthquake, who still lay at length on the torn-up ground, its red nostrils widely dilated, its eyes no longer sleepy or tricky, but filled with a cowed terror such as had never before shone from them.

Stooping, the tamer patted the broncho gently on the wet neck, passing upward to its head, lingering a few moments about his eyes, then on over the arched nose to the quivering nostrils. Whether it was animal magnetism, or simply the result of gentle compassion, must be left to the reader for decision, but certain it is that the convulsive shivering grew less violent. The wild look in the eyes of the broncho softened and its lids relaxed. Its pantings grew less fast, and when Royal Hart gently twitched the reins, Little Earthquake slowly rose to its feet, standing meek and subdued, making no effort to escape, even when its master dropped the bridle and stepped backward. And at a gentle command, the broncho followed the sport back to where the spectators were murmuring their wonder and applause.

When only a few yards away, an uplifted hand checked the broncho. Royal Hart lightly leaped into the saddle, touching neither rein nor stirrup as he sat thus for a brief space. Then, with deft agility he sprang erect, standing sideways in the saddle, his arms lightly folded.

"You see, my dear friends, some things can be done just as easily as others, if you only go about it after the right fashion," the yellow-haired sport said, with a bland smile and blander tones. "Still, you mustn't run away with the notion that Little Earthquake is thoroughly converted, for he isn't. I don't advertise to accomplish marvels and give a guarantee after a single lesson. But I do say that until Little Earthquake has had ample time to forget his lesson, he is safe for an infant to ride."

With a bow, the Bounding Buck leaped to the ground, just as Queen Nadine pushed forward. And before any one in the company could anticipate her purpose, she sprang gracefully from her own saddle into that just vacated by Royal Hart, touching Little Earthquake keenly with her spurred boot. One quick leap under the goad—a leap that brought a sharp cry of warning from the crowd—then the broncho trotted quietly off in a circle, Queen Nadine turning and directing his movements simply by the swaying of her lithe figure, without touching rein.

From a trot into a gallop, from a gallop to a run, swiftly veering around until headed direct for the gathering. And at a single sharp command from the lips of its mistress, Little Earthquake stopped short without other restraint.

Queen Nadine sprang lightly to the ground, her beautiful face flushed warmly, her great eyes glowing with excitement and praise as they rested on the calm, smiling countenance of the man whose skill had wrought such a marvelous transformation.

"You have won the stakes, sir, and I gladly hand them to you," she said, holding out the folded bills, when Nash Whildon cut in eagerly:

"And in losing, I still count myself a winner, Mr. Hart! I've seen more and better riding in an hour than I ever saw in my life before!"

"You make me blush, my dear sir," bowed Royal, with affected humility, but not neglecting to secure the money while so doing.

"And I'll double the sum as a gift, if you'll engage as head rider with me for a year to come," quickly added Whildon, his eyes aglow.

"Name your own figures, and consider them accepted without a word of dispute," interposed Queen Nadine, one gloved hand closing firmly upon his arm, as her other hand motioned the master of Open Hand Ranch back. "I claim the first say-so. Who dares dispute my right?"

"Not I, most assuredly, your Majesty," smiled Royal Hart, bowing.

"Then you accept? You are ours—you will engage to Falcon Ranch, on your own terms?" eagerly persisted the fair amazon, flashing a glance of almost fierce triumph over her shoulder at the darkening countenance of Nash Whildon.

"Yours—until death doth us part, your Majesty!"

The smile faded, and a half suspicious glitter filled the great black eyes. And there was a half-suspicious look in the eyes of the queen:

"What am I to understand by that, Mr. Hart?"

A shrug of the shoulders, an expressive out-turning of each palm.

"Must I answer? Must I open a leaf that looks much more wonderful to me than you would at first sight? No, no, no, as you are so careful, and so quick to find fault, I am enough to procure a man with which I may bide my blushes as I confess—"

"Drop it, man, if you don't like to speak out,"

laughed Colonel Falconer, as he pressed forward and gripped the yellow-haired sport by the hand, shaking it vigorously. "I don't care if a score of sheriffs are at your heels! I'll agree to stand 'em off until the sun sets, anyway; and by that time, with you among my men, the Falcon Ranch will be on top of the Open Hand—and that's what I hunger for most! No hard feelings toward you, friend, of course," with a nod toward Whildon.

"I'm not kicking, old friend," with a cold smile. "I feel almost as deep an interest in the success of Falcon Ranch as you do, and only for form's sake, I'd own up defeated without running the thing off."

"Then it is settled, my fine fellow?" persisted the colonel, turning again to Royal Hart. "You will enter my employ? You will consider the engagement to begin from this very minute?"

The Bounding Buck cast a quick glance in the direction of his own horse, held by the Indian; then asked:

"You are willing to hire two, instead of one? Red Clam can't well get along without his tongue, you know! And not even Falcon Ranch can win me away from my pard, red though his skin is!"

"What can he do?" hesitated the colonel.

"What he has done, you have just had a sample. All I know about riding, Red Clam taught me. And even to-day he can give me odds and a beating, without more than half-trying!"

Falconer laughingly shook his head.

"You can hardly expect me to swallow all that, but I'll tell you what I will do: I'll pay you your own price if you'll agree to ride for me to-day. If you want to extend the engagement, we'll talk it over after the show, and unless you ask the entire earth, I reckon we can come to an amicable arrangement. How does that hit you?"

"Right where I live," with a low laugh as their palms crossed. "You can count on both Red Clam and your humble servant from this time on, until we have a falling out!"

Colonel Falconer looked around in search of Nadine, but she had vanished during the conversation, and eager to inform her of the bargain he had made, the master of Falcon Ranch hustled away through the crowd, which rapidly scattered, now that the show was at an end.

Royal Hart passed over to where his red pard was waiting, and rapidly donned his coat, hat and weapons. But he had scarcely done so when the sound of a light footstep caused him to turn around.

Nash Whildon met him with a frank smile and extended hand, saying:

"I ask pardon for my hard words up yonder, my dear fellow. Shake, in token that they are forgiven, if not forgotten."

"If you are satisfied, I surely ought to be," was the laughing response as their palms crossed. "I've made expenses, and secured a comfortable situation for the pair of us. Not so bad for an hour's work!"

"It may turn out even better than you imagine, if you play your cards right. May I ask you to take a little walk with me? There is something I would like to say, which—"

"Why not?" bluntly interposed the yellow-haired sport, with wide-open eyes. "It's only a fool who throws away a chance of learning the ropes in a strange locality. And whatever else I may turn out to be, the man who thinks to buy me for a fool, is going to get left—bad!"

Nash Whildon led the way to the right, passing part way around the mesa, like one who wishes to make sure against being interrupted before he has said his say out. Without a murmur Royal Hart followed this lead, patiently biding his time, though there was just the ghost of a smile playing about his mustache-shaded lip.

Was it born of his own expectations, or did it come through catching a glimpse of two figures partially concealed by the foliage on the mesa top, seemingly engaged in earnest discourse?

"I wanted to engage your services myself, as you must have seen, pard," began Whildon, coming to a pause, with a quick glance around them. "Of course I could only give way when Miss Falconer chipped in. After all, it amounts to pretty much the same thing."

"Sits the wind in that quarter?" murmured the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow, with a furtive glance toward the couple on the mesa top, now plain enough to recognize as Nadine and Pink Archer.

"It's an open secret, as you might say," laughed Whildon, without noting the direction of the shy glance. "I have as close an interest in Falcon Ranch as my own, to tell the truth. And yet—you are no fool, you hinted. I like that! A fool might do much harm without knowing it, where a wise man could turn much to good."

"About this new place of yours. You'll find the colonel something of a fool, mixed pretty thoroughly with the brute. But he don't count so much as the lady. You have seen something of her temper to-day."

"Spirited—quite spirited, I should say," murmured Hart.

"As for myself—don't judge altogether by what has passed between us this day. I was out

of sorts, and—but let that pass. You will learn to know me better in time. All I wish to say is this:

"You will put money in your purse by serving my interests whenever or wherever you can do so. You can insure yourself a paying situation for life by sticking to my side, even though it may seem to lead you contrary to the wishes of—you understand?"

He broke off impatiently as he saw the yellow-haired sport was hardly giving him the close attention he desired. Royal Hart was smiling broadly as he gazed up at those two figures on the mesa. And as Nash Whildon followed the direction of his eyes, a vicious curse hissed through his grating teeth.

"I reckon I'll chip in on the side of the young lady, pard, if it's all the same to you," coolly drawled the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow, smiling into his inflamed countenance.

"Have it so if you like, curse you!" snarled the master of Open Hand Ranch, turning away.

"I'll just add this much for you to chew on: That girl will be my wife before this month is out!"

He strode rapidly away toward the front of the mesa, leaving Royal Hart smiling after him, and softly murmuring to himself:

"Talk is cheap, and you sling it out mighty thick; but I'm stacking my ducats on the other side—you just bet I am, pardner!"

CHAPTER XIV. ALL FOR LOVE.

QUEEN NADINE might have lingered longer, until the bargain with this marvelous horseman was fully clinched, only for one thing.

Even as she cast that defiant glance back at Nash Whildon, her keen eyes caught sight of a human figure rapidly scaling the mesa by way of the generally used pathway in front. Seen but for an instant, and that at a considerable distance, but that was enough. She recognized Pink Archer, and instantly decided that he had stolen away in hopes of securing another interview with Nellie Angell. And when Colonel Falconer pressed forward so eagerly, Queen Nadine yielded her place, slipping away, almost wholly unobserved by the hero worshipers.

She did not stop to count the cost. She was more than half beside herself just then, and it is only just to state that she had drunk far more wine at the table than she had any idea of.

Her veins seemed filled with liquid fire. Her brain buzzed and whirled as though a swarm of bees had been let loose within. She had thought for only one thing: to tear Pink Archer from the side of that puny child, Angel Nell.

This was all she thought of during those few minutes before she gained the mesa top and glanced around in search of the lovers. She must separate them—must keep him from pledging his vows to her until—until—

That was as far as her whirling, unsettled brain could carry the thought, just then. And, curious as it may seem, as it did seem to her even then, it was with a confused sensation of disappointment that she caught sight of Pink Archer, standing alone, near the rear edge of the mesa. Angel Nell was not with him, was not to be detected by the swift, comprehensive glance which she cast around.

The young foreman of Falcon Ranch caught sight of her, at almost the same instant, and a flush shot into his strong face. With an involuntary movement he partially shielded himself by the trunk of a stunted tree, but even as he did so, Queen Nadine rapidly advanced, speaking his name.

She paused when but little more than arm's length away from him, the flush fading from her cheeks, a reproachful gleam softening the too vivid fire in her great black eyes. Pink Archer involuntarily glanced at his own breast, where but a short time before Queen Nadine had pinned her colors, but which were not there now.

"Where is it? Have you dared give it to her?" sharply demanded the fair amazon, scarce realizing what she said in that moment of bitter pain. "Or are you too proud to wear my favors?"

Pink Archer silently drew the ribbon from his bosom, and held it forth in resignation as he quietly uttered:

"As a defeated champion, I have no right to wear it longer, Miss Falconer. It was a mistake your giving it to me in the first place. I am your father's servant, and as such too humble for such a choice. Give the knot to one nearer your own station in life."

A swift motion of her clinched hand struck the bit of color from his fingers, and as it fluttered to the earth, Queen Nadine spitefully ground it into the dirt with her spurred heel.

"Do you think I am blind? Do you think I was for a moment deceived by your clever acting out yonder? Bah!" with a short, bitter laugh that told how deeply she felt the truth. "I saw it all! You rode just long enough to retrieve your reputation as a horseman, and then, as an excuse for flouting me, you pretended defeat! For a little while I thought you killed or crippled, and during those few moments I suffered all the torments of the damned! To learn—what? That by a single effort you could have

freed yourself from the saddle, free to renew the struggle when Little Earthquake arose!"

She ceased, her voice choking with strong emotions, strangely mingling. The foreman drooped his eyes, turning a shade paler, but without making any reply. He knew that she was charging him with a truth, and knew that even were he to lie, he could not alter her belief.

"Why did you do this, Pink Archer? Was it because of the last words I whispered in your ear? Was it because I said—"

"I have forgotten—I pray you let the matter rest, Miss Falconer," muttered the foreman. "Those words should never have been uttered, even in a spirit of pique, because—"

A low, soft laugh cut his hesitating speech short, and surprise forced his drooping gaze to lift. For an instant he felt the hot blood turning his face scarlet, for that laugh sounded like mockery to his ears. Only until his eyes encountered those great black orbs.

He saw that Queen Nadine had cast all restraint to the winds. He saw her insane passion glowing in her eyes, in her crimsoned cheeks, her parted lips. And though he shrunk back a pace, it was only to be followed as quickly.

"If those words came from the very bottom of my heart, Pink Archer? If when I uttered them I was praying with all my soul that you might prove victor over Little Earthquake—and over his mistress as well? If I repeat them now what would be your answer?"

Even a half-wit could not have mistaken her with that face before his eyes, with that light beaming fairly upon him. And though the honest young fellow drooped his eyes once more, he knew that further evasion would be worse than useless.

"I should say what I thought at the time, Miss Falconer: that it would be far better for us both had you spared your breath. I am only a servant on your father's ranch, and—"

"How long need you remain a servant?"

"Only until to-morrow comes," quickly catching at the opening, and hastily adding in defiance of her impatient gesture: "Then the position of foreman will be vacant, unless you can induce that stranger, who calls himself Royal Hart, to accept the office. You have just seen a sample of his work, and from that you can readily calculate how much Falcon Ranch will be the gainer."

"I am talking of you, not Royal Hart," was the persistent response. "How long need you remain a servant, as you choose to term the place you now fill? Are you blind?" with almost fierce intensity as her clinched hands tapped him swiftly on the chest.

"I could almost wish I was—and deaf—Miss Falconer," was the grave, almost sad reply.

Queen Nadine turned pale, casting a swift glance around them. They were partially hidden behind the shrubbery from view of the servants beyond, who were far too deeply occupied with the remnants of the feast to have eyes for aught else. And though the same glance showed her the figures of Nash Whildon and Royal Hart out upon the plain, she cared naught for that. It was ears, not eyes she wished to guard against.

The foreman saw something of this, and tried to escape the ordeal, more on her account than his own. But at his first step Nadine checked him by barring the way.

"Patience for a little, Mr. Archer," with a faint smile that suddenly altered to a look of mingled rage and grief as she hurriedly added: "I have said too much not to say more! You shall listen, though I blow my brains out from very shame the next moment!"

"Another time—when you are calmer, Miss Falconer."

"Am I drunk?" with a strained laugh that sent a little shiver over his strong frame. "If so, it is with more than wine! It is with—I must say it, or suffocate! I am drunk—drunk with love for you, my darling! Say that you will not cast me off! Say that you will have pity on me, even as you hope for mercy hereafter!"

In choking gasps came the mad words, and Queen Nadine would have flung her arms about his neck, regardless of all, forgetful of all else, only for the quick, strong grasp that caught and held her hands down.

In low but resolute tones the foreman replied to the half-crazed woman, his honest eyes striving to calm hers:

"I tried to stop you—tried to spare you all this, Miss Falconer. When you grow calmer and recover your usual good sense, you will be fully as sorry for your mistake as I am now."

With a swift effort, Queen Nadine freed her hands, stepping back a pace, her great eyes blazing steadily as they encountered his brown orbs. And her voice was clear and cold as she uttered the words:

"You think I am mad? You think this is only an insane freak on my part, born of an excess of champagne?"

"I will try not to think about it at all," gravely.

"Every word I have uttered is gospel truth," in the same cold, even tones. "I love you more than all heaven and earth. I ask you to give me pity in return for that love, and you—"

"Have no right to accept, even if my heart made me do so, since I already love another," calmly interposed the young foreman.

"You mean Angel Nell? Have you told her as much? And she?"

"I have not spoken as yet, but I mean to do so at the first fair chance. As for her reply—I have dared cherish hopes that—"

A gloved hand rose and cut his slow speech short. And almost viciously Queen Nadine flashed forth:

"If you love her, never dare tell her as much! For, sure as fate, I will kill the woman who dares accept the love you deny me!"

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE SADDLE, AND OUT OF IT.

WITH those fierce words, Queen Nadine turned and swept away without pausing for reply or comment. And, pale, uneasy, Pink Archer slowly followed, leaving the mesa for the plain below, just as Colonel Falconer was on the point of climbing the steep path in hopes to find him.

"Hustle around, Archer, and get your boys ready for the tilt with the Open Hand gang!" he muttered, excitedly. "We've got 'em where the wool's mighty short, and I'm hungry for the cheering time to come! I've engaged both Hart and the red nigger who taught him how to rile, and Whildon can't spual even if he wants to, ever so bad!"

The programme contained other sports, but by general desire they were considered off, such was the eagerness to witness the grand "passage of arms" between the long rival ranches.

Something concerning this has already been mentioned.

As will always be found to be the case, both Falcon and Open Hand Ranch took pride in boasting of their skilled riders. Each believed, or at least boldly claimed, its superiority, and though there had, at each round-up, been impromptu tests of skill, up to the present time the matter really hung in doubt. And to add a double attraction to his venture, Colonel Falconer had privately wagered a goodly sum with Nash Whildon that a picked lot of his men could defeat the best riders to be selected from the Open Hand staff.

And while Pink Archer was preparing his men for the tournament, Colonel Falconer, in company with Nash Whildon, gathered the eager guests together, plainly stating the rules which were to govern the contest.

"There will be twelve men on each side, and they will be entitled to make use of any ruse or trick that does not actually endanger life. They will be turned out in a circle, three hundred yards in diameter, inside of which the struggle must be decided. If horse or rider crosses that line, the one so doing must at once retire as a defeated man. If a rider is dismounted, even though he retain his feet, he is to be considered defeated, and must retire with his horse at once. In brief, the main point is to see which side can keep their seats the longest.

"A man is at liberty to use a knife to cut a rope, when he is in jeopardy, but if he dares to strike an adversary in anger with a weapon, the contest must stop short, and the offender will be punished to the full extent of the law."

Colonel Falconer turned inquiringly toward Whildon, as though to ask if he had any amendments to offer, but the master of the Open Hand Ranch simply nodded, then wheeled his horse to look after his champions.

Ever since the fall of Pedro, the Mexican, the men of Open Hand had looked sour and sullen, but when their master declared his purpose of joining them, they brightened up wonderfully.

They knew that, all things considered, this addition would serve to strengthen them. Whildon was a fine horseman, and with so much at stake all knew he would cast aside his assumed listlessness, and "go in to win!"

"That hits me right where I live, lads!" chuckled the colonel, as he visited his picked riders, rubbing his hands together in high glee. "Take the starch out of the fellow, anyway! I'll give a month's wages to the man that tumbles him in the dirt—I will, by—!"

"Pity to soil his good clothes," laughed Royal Hart, "but what the boss says is law and gospel to his men. Mr. Whildon is booked for a mouthful of dry dirt, lads!"

"You don't want to throw away a chance, though, mind you," seriously added the colonel. "He's no slouch in the saddle, and good as a Mexican with the *riata*. He's got a few prime devils to back him up, too!"

"While we are all little tin angels on wheels!" smiled Hart, turning on his heel and drawing a little aside with Red Clam, to whom he whispered earnestly.

Colonel Falconer eyed them curiously, but the face of the Indian told him nothing, and that of the yellow-haired sport was hidden from his view. Just the shadow of a frown came into his face, and there was a light in his eyes such as no man fully at ease ever carries.

And yet, as he inwardly muttered: what had he to dread? How could these strangers influence his life for either good or evil? Bah! it was but a mad fancy; he had never seen either of the pards, red or white, before this day!

The circle on the plain was being formed. A stake was planted in the ground, a ring slipped over it, to which was tied a measured line, to the other end of which was fastened a picket-pin. One man slowly scored the ground with this, while others followed after, spreading a broad line of slacked lime, showing so clear and bright that not even a hard-pressed horseman could fail to note the warning limits.

Each champion took especial pains with his riding gear, testing every strap and line, securing the double cinches with particular care to guard against slip or turn. And every stirrup-leather was carefully overhauled and tested, mindful of the treacherous trick through which Pink Archer had so narrowly escaped a horrible death.

All this took time, but owing to the deferring of other events, the day was still young enough to insure ample time for the closing scene, and there was far too much at stake for either side to risk defeat by a single careless move.

Finally all was in readiness, and a chosen man conducted each dozen into the charmed circle, stationing them on opposite sides, within a slightly marked out square, which they were to retain until the signal was sounded that bade them open the contest.

A few of the guests were stationed on the mesa, from whence an admirable view of the maneuvers could be had, but the large majority preferred the saddle on the plain below. Among these was Queen Nadine, bright and almost feverishly gay, showing no signs outwardly of her recent defeat in her dearest hopes.

When the guides came back and the contestants alone remained inside the magic circle, Colonel Falconer waved his kerchief, and keen-eyed Ebony Tom, stationed on the mesa with horn in hand, caught the signal and sounded the onset with all the power of his strong lungs.

Simultaneously the two parties dashed forward, seeming intent on coming at once to close quarters. But there was a change after the first few strides. While the champions of the Falcon Ranch kept straight on, the party commanded by Nash Whildon divided and swept around in a widening semicircle, or "Indian fashion."

Each man held his lasso in readiness for use, but for some little time not a single cast was made by either side. And Falconer laughed sharply as he saw his men slackening their pace as they neared the center of the ring.

"Not to be caught so easy, my lad!" he cried, fairly purple in the face from excitement, which was shared in greater or less degree by all who looked on. "Thought they'd break and chase, did ye? Not any!"

Not all present shared his exultation. Some among those who really favored the Falcon Ranch champions, fancied they had lost a point in thus permitting themselves to be surrounded by their adversaries. If they kept in a compact clump, as now, their casts would be hampered. And if a simultaneous attack was made by the men now leisurely circling around them, among so many a few must surely fall.

Only a few took the trouble to reason so closely, however, preferring to watch and wait, cheering each fine point as it was made.

The Falcon Ranch champions seemed content to wait for an opening, keeping in a fairly open circle, with faces to the front, paying attention only to what was going on directly before their eyes, trusting to their fellows to guard their rear.

Then, as Nash Whildon uttered a shrill cry, first one man and then another of his champions veered a little closer, shooting out a lasso over the ground, plainly trying to catch a restless hoof, but as often as a failure was made, the obedient steed veered sharply to one side and fell out of the circle, while its master swiftly recoiled his lariat.

"Steady, you!" grated Colonel Falconer, fairly dripping perspiration in his excitement as he saw Royal Hart move a little in advance of the main party, wheeling around them as though in daring a rush.

"He's after Whildon, dead sure!" muttered Parker Mandrake, and the truth of this assertion soon became evident to all.

Careless though he seemed, no one in all that white ring was more in earnest than the yellow-haired sport from the lower country. Perhaps it was because he felt in duty bound to serve his new master to the very utmost of his ability. Perhaps he felt a little grudge against the master of Open Hand Ranch for trying to tempt him to serve one master while taking pay from another. Perhaps there was something lying back of all that led him to plot the downfall of the opposing leader above all others.

Be that as it may, he was acting through cool deliberation, rather than reckless bravado.

Twice a secret signal from Nash Whildon sent two lassoes in swift succession at the heels of the proudly-prancing black steed, only to grate his teeth with chagrin as he saw Royal Hart leap across the danger-line at the first attempt: to whirl face to the enemy at the second, bending low and sweeping a gleaming blade across one loop before it could be jerked back by its owner.

A hoarse cheer broke from the purple lips of Colonel Falconer at this adroit action, for though the chagrined lassoer was yet in the ring, he would be seriously crippled by the loss of his lariat.

"Make him your foreman in place of Archer, and no ranch in Texas will dare send you a challenge to ride for the pennant!" cried Parker Mandrake, his little eyes glittering as though full of fire.

"He's mine, if I have to take him in as partner!"

And just at that moment the colonel was more than half in earnest when he made the declaration, too.

"Ready, pard!" softly uttered Royal Hart as he passed once more in front of the silent Kickapoo chief, who was intently watching every move his partner made. "He's getting ready to take a nibble, and—"

He slowly passed around, covertly though keenly watching the master of Open Hand Ranch.

Cool and steel-nerved though he counted himself, Nash Whildon was chafing and growing impatient at these unanticipated tactics. He saw that, moderate as was their pace, his men were taking considerable out of their steeds, and as yet the only triumph had turned against him.

He was tempted to order a simultaneous charge from all sides, but bold as he was, there was something in this stranger that "rattled" him.

If he could only break that compact, yet open clump! If he could only once make an opening!

Once more he uttered a sharp cry, wordless, but seemingly fully comprehended by his followers, for they spurred up their horses until racing around in a gradually narrowing circle at almost top speed. And then, in swift succession their snake-like lassoes shot out, some curling along the ground, others hissing through the air, but each in succession aimed at the rider on the big black steed.

But Royal Hart was not a man to be caught napping, and at a word his steed bounded forward, shooting clear of the main body and heading direct for the master of the Open Hand Ranch.

With a fierce cry of exultation, Nash Whildon whirled his right hand forward, feeling sure of his main hope for an instant, believing that the short charge was made wholly in order to elude those snake-like loops. But the black horse sprung to one side as nimbly as ever Little Earthquake had performed the same feat, then stopping short as its master sent out his own noose, cutting the dust directly in front of the horse ridden by Whildon.

Instinctively the ratcher drew hard upon the reins, sending his spurs home at the same time to clear the peril with one mighty leap. But just as he acted thus, Red Clam shot out from his position and duplicated the cast of his partner, calculating so nicely that the leaping animal struck fairly within the almost circular trap. And back the clay-bank bounded, the greased noose closing knee-high on the horse, jerking its feet clear of the ground and hurling its rider clear out of the saddle, to turn partially over in the air, then strike the ground with a thud that reached the ears of the wildly cheering colonel!

CHAPTER XVI.

"SAVE YOUR LOVER, IF YOU CAN!"

AND clearer, higher, more malicious rung the voice of Queen Nadine as her steed was sent up to the very border of the inclosure, one gloved hand waving a snowy kerchief high above her head in applause.

Yet it was not altogether wild enthusiasm awakened by this signal triumph on the part of her champions that led to her actions. Woman though she was, she had long since known Nash Whildon to be as venomous as his temper was hot when once he lost his practiced self-control, and she hated him just enough this day to take especial delight in foiling his efforts.

The trap was an adroit one, worked to perfection, and a cooler headed performer than the master of Open Hand Ranch might easily have fallen into it.

It was with thought of something like the general attack which was made upon himself and horse that led Royal Hart to single himself from the main force. It was both to elude the curling loops and to still further throw Nash Whildon off his guard that he sent his good steed still further from the remainder. And knowing right well that he could place implicit confidence in his red pard, he made his own cast.

Even then the master of Open Hand Ranch might have escaped, had he retained all the coolness with which he entered the struggle. But he forgot all else in his fierce longing to dispose of this dangerous stranger, and when Red Clam's lasso jerked the feet from under his horse, he was hurled from the saddle before he could even tighten the grip of his legs.

Far ahead, turning over while splitting the air, to strike the hard ground with his broad shoulders first shot Nash Whildon, turning end for end with anything but graceful coloring.

The fall itself seemed severe enough to kill or cripple any ordinary being, but the master of Open Hand Ranch showed a cat-like elasticity in bounding to his feet, one hand dashing the dirt and sand from his eyes, the other instinctively grasping a revolver as though he meant to thus avenge his humiliation.

Right or wrong, so Queen Nadine interpreted the action, and her snowy kerchief floated to the ground as she flashed forth a revolver, sending a bullet whistling close past the head of the irate rancher, added to the warning her sharp, angry cry:

"Steady, Nash Whildon! Break the rules, and you shall pay the penalty, though I have to play judge and executioner myself!"

Her stern warning was supplemented by a general chorus of excited shouts, yells and cheers from the guests, followed by a rush forward that threatened to destroy the sacred limits for a time, at least.

In vain Colonel Falconer yelled for his champions to press their advantage. The golden opportunity was lost as Royal Hart checked the charge that would almost surely have resulted in serious damage to the cause of the Open Hand gang. And during the brief flurry, one important point was won by the cool dexterity of Osorio the Roper, who stole close enough to dash in and clip the lasso of the Bounding Buck before his object could be divined or frustrated.

Nash Whildon uttered a sharp whistle that served to gather his men in a more compact shape, even while he himself was recovering his well trained horse, from whose legs Red Clam had deftly shaken his lasso the instant his end was accomplished. Leaping into the saddle, the master of Open Hand Ranch rode out of the ring, seemingly cold and composed, though his blue eyes were fairly ablaze.

The two bands of riders were now confronting each other, seemingly undecided just what to do next, casting quick, uneasy glances toward the spot where Colonel Falconer was wildly gesticulating and hoarsely shouting forth words which his own ears could hardly have interpreted without an error.

He was fairly beside himself for the time being, and was hardly conscious of the words that rolled chokingly from his throat. His heart was so set on victory over the Open Hand! And to see that victory almost assured, only to be neglected, all through the hot-headed action of Nash Whildon and Nadine! It was hard, for a fact.

"I thought you never lost your head, Mr. Whildon!" sneered Nadine, as she spurred her steed forward to meet the master of Open Hand Ranch at the point where he crossed the white circle. "If that is so, what did you intend doing with your gun? You helped form the rules and conditions, I believe?"

"If I lost my head, you found it for me," with a short bow, and a grim smile upon his flushed face. "Was that bit of lead only a warning, or—did you, too, have unsteady nerves when you pulled trigger?"

It was not hard to rightly interpret the meaning so thinly veiled by those crisp sentences, and Queen Nadine made no effort to dissemble. Her red lips curled, her great eyes glowed as they boldly met that suspicious gaze.

"You think I shot to kill or cripple? Bah! do I often miss a target of that size when my soul is bent on sending the lead direct? It may come to that in the end, but just now—I fancied you would suffer more by having to face your defeat with open eyes!"

Nash Whildon shrugged his broad shoulders as he glanced out over the ring, sounding a signal that set his men in motion once more.

"It is not the first pair of dusty shoulders I've had to bear. My skin is not so thin as you seem to imagine. Some one had to make an opening, and why not your humble servant, as well as a better rider?"

"Then you admit—"

"Anything and everything you wish to claim, Queen Nadine. Why not? If Falcon Ranch comes out top of the heap, is not the victory fully as much mine as yours?"

A sharp sound, that was almost an oath in her mother's tongue, escaped the red lips of the amazon at this cool speech, but she resented it in no other shape just at that moment. There was a change in the scene before them that held her eyes and tongue spellbound for a time.

The rival squads had mechanically resumed their former tactics as soon as the unanticipated interruption was ended; but this did not last long. Effective as it had proven for his side up to the present moment, Royal Hart might have been content to keep on as he had begun, but the champions of Open Hand Ranch were of a different opinion. At a signal from Lazy Lupton, who took command when his chief was vanquished, the riders regulated their pace so as to gradually form two divisions, though still strung out in a circle. Then, the rearmost spurring faster while those in advance reined in, a quick shifting brought the two squads close enough for their purpose.

A hoarse yell from Lazy Lupton sent them forward, front and rear, charging swiftly upon the Falcon Ranch champions, half of their number sending their lariats whistling ahead, some high,

others low, while the rest kept their lassoes ready to both guard and attack just as seemed most favorable to their cause.

Swift as was this maneuver, it did not catch Royal Hart napping. A sharp cry from his lips divided his party into equal parts, sending them out at right angles with the course taken by their adversaries for a few rods, then spreading out in a fan-shape, and wheeling to attack in turn. After this the changes and shiftings were so rapid as to bewilder the keenest eye on watch to follow and analyze them.

Each man seemed to be acting on his own hook, guarding himself and seeking the downfall of an enemy at one and the same time. Now here, now there a horse would trip and stumble, putting a rider out of the list for good, as a rule, though wild yells of praise broke from the excited guests as they saw one or two of the horsemen sticking to the saddle at risk of broken bones until the struggling steed regained his feet.

Not a sound escaped the tight-closed lips of Nash Whildon as his blazing eyes followed the rapid shiftings, though for the most part confined to a very small portion of the contestants. More frequently on the strong, graceful figure of Pink Archer, however.

There, too, the gleaming orbs of the fair Amazon seemed to find the deepest interest, and twice a ringing cheer came from her throat as the young foreman performed a feat of cool dexterity, once emptying a saddle for Open Hand, then saving himself from a double onset.

Nash Whildon clicked his teeth viciously as he saw this last escape, and his brows wrinkled savagely as he smothered the curse that leaped up in his throat.

He seemed to care nothing for the fall of his own men, or of the steadily thinning ranks opposed to them as the contest waxed furious and caution grew less prominent. It was not the general result that lent his eyes that burning gleam, that caused his blood to course so hotly through his veins. As he said, he cared little how the trials ended, just so Pink Archer went down in shame—or death!

And then—the longest for moment came! And forgetting his usual prudence, the master of Open Hand Ranch laughed viciously as he turned to Queen Nadine, hissing ejaculating:

"Look, Nadine! Look—and save your lover if you can!"

At the same instant two loops dropped over the head of Pink Archer, cast from opposite directions. And the men who cast them were turning their horses to dash still further apart. When the double shock came, it would surely mean death!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TOURNAMENT ENDED.

It was this for which Lazy Lupton and Osorio the Roper had been planning from the very beginning of the contest. It was for this that Nash Whildon was looking and hoping, eating his heart out with savage chagrin as, time and again, the unsuspecting foreman foiled the efforts of his skillful enemies.

But as he made a cast at one of the opposing side, he left himself briefly ungarded, and swift advantage was taken of the opening.

At the same instant Lupton and the Mexican made their casts, that of the latter being from a shorter distance, and his pliant noose dropping fairly over head and shoulders, a swift pluck drawing the rawhide coil about the foreman's arms. The second noose, which he was unable to avoid while thus hampered, stopped at his neck, and with a savage laugh of venomous hatred, the burly rascal who manipulated it, wheeled his horse to dash away though he must have known that death would follow the opposing pluck!

All this so swiftly that even Queen Nadine, who saw it all, had not time to utter a warning cry. She felt her heart turning cold as ice. She closed her eyes and averted her head, ignorant even of the malignant speech from the lips of the rancher which so plainly betrayed his murderous hopes.

A warning shout went up from the alarmed spectators, but that was powerless to change the result, and only for prompt and united action on the part of the two stranger pards, a tragedy must surely have followed.

Royal Hart was just scrambling to his feet by the side of his fallen horse, when he saw the treacherous intent of the two men. A sharp cry escaped his lips as he drew a revolver, bringing it to a level and firing without the loss of an instant. And at the same breath Red Clam sent a gleaming missile hissing through the air.

The shock came, but it was only from one side. Pink Archer was drawn backward until his broad shoulders fairly brushed the haunch of his good steed, but that was all.

With an effort, he retained his seat and drew himself erect as the bullet-weakened lass parted with an audible twang! And over his breast hung the end of the lariat severed smooth and clean by the knife so deftly hurled by Red Clam, the Kickapoo!

"Foul play, you cur!" screamed Nash Whildon, spurring his horse forward in frenzied rage

and baffled hatred. "You were out of the fight, and had no right to—"

"I interfered to save life—to foil a dastardly attempt at murder, sir!" sharply, coldly cut in the yellow-haired sport as his smoking weapon rose to a level, covering the infuriated rancher.

"Hold!" came the ringing voice of Queen Nadine as she shot between the two men, reining in to thrust her revolver fairly into the ghastly pale face of the ranch-owner. "I'll kill the man that dares to fire a shot or strike a blow!"

"Stop the racket! I call on you all, gents, to aid me!" thundered Colonel Falconer, rushing forward, fairly beside himself with excitement and agitation at the unexpected turn events had taken. "Hold hard, all of you! I'll butcher the rascal that dares move a finger until I give him leave!"

Swift as thought Nash Whildon shot out a hand and knocked the pistol upward, his fingers closing about that supple wrist, just as the weapon exploded, sending a bullet whistling over his head.

For the second time had his life been saved by instinctive quickness, for he saw that the frenzied woman intended to send a bullet through his brain.

His brain seemed cleared, his coolness restored by his peril, and a short, hard laugh escaped his lips as he secured the weapon, opening it and casting out the shells with deft rapidity, passing it back to its owner as he said, coolly:

"It will be safer thus, Miss Nadine. With shells in it, the gun is altogether too light on trigger to be safe in the hands of a lady!"

She snatched the weapon from his hand, wheeling her horse away to mingle with the excited spectators who had flocked into the ring. She passed through them, dashing up to Pink Archer, who was casting the severed loops from his person.

"You are safe? You are not seriously hurt?" she breathlessly exclaimed, her tones hoarse and unnatural.

"Thanks to my good friends, yes," bowed the young foreman, riding past her to where Royal Hart stood, patting the quivering nostrils of his good horse.

Queen Nadine, pale and aged-looking in the face, gazed after him for an instant, then wheeled her horse and rode back to where Colonel Falconer was excitedly talking to Nash Whildon. She did not stop to catch the purport of their discussion, but coldly interposed:

"The contest must stop, right where it is now! It should never have begun. An idiot might have known the ending must be unsatisfactory. It is sport we came here to enjoy, not a tragedy!"

"I am willing it should end, but if I felt inclined to be a stickler, I might claim the victory. A man unhorsed, is a man defeated and out of the ring. That fellow had no right to strike another blow on his side."

"Not even to prevent murder?" sneered Nadine, her eyes flashing.

Nash Whildon turned to Colonel Falconer, his voice icy cold.

"Do you indorse the charge of intended murder, sir?"

Falconer flushed uneasily, but shook his head. "Don't mind what the girl says, pard. The excitement has proved a little too much for her, and she don't mean all she says."

"I ask, because if a man were to charge my fellows with an attempt at murder, I could tell him he lied. Since the words come from the lips of a lady, I can only regret her mistaken judgment."

The words were pointed by a low bow toward Queen Nadine, who gazed keenly, intently into the cold, emotionless face of the ranch-owner for a brief space, as though she sought to read the plain truth written thereon. If so, she was foiled. Once more Nash Whildon was the steel-nerved man of the world all who had dealings with him usually found.

"Let it go at that, then," she uttered, with an outward flinging of one gloved hand. "Call the match a draw, if you please; more than that I will never consent to, if I have to enter the ring as a contestant myself!"

"A draw it shall be, then, your Majesty," bowed Whildon, reining his horse back until in a measure clear of the jam, then lifting his voice in a signal that sent his men slowly out of the circle, back to their recent quarters.

A general cheer greeted this decision, for the majority of the spectators felt that no better arrangement could have been made. They had seen enough to know that such a contest could hardly be fought out to an end, without too great a risk to life and limb.

"I don't generally favor draws, but this seems to be an exception to the rule," nodded Parker Mandrake, seriously. "Of course Miss Nadine was a little off, but—"

It was a hiatus which no one seemed eager to fill. Though it was hard to think such a dastardly scheme would be attempted before so many eyes, yet the fact remained. True, the excitement was intense among the spectators, and of course must have been equally as strong among the contestants; but could even excitement blind old riders to the fact that no man

thus caught could escape death when the opposite strain should come simultaneously?

Colonel Falconer was a sorely-troubled man during the next few minutes. He knew that Nash Whildon had plotted to kill or cripple the young foreman of Falcon Ranch, and though he had, not so many hours before, tacitly agreed to the "accident," its failure was troubling him far more than would have been the case had perfect success rewarded the dastardly attempt. Then, the tragedy itself would have covered anything unusual in his looks or manner, but now he felt that every man who happened to look toward him, was mentally wondering how nearly he had been concerned in that ugly circumstance.

He bustled about, trying by doubled activity and volubility to cover his mental anxiety, and though he soon suspected that Whildon was seeking an interview, he tried all he knew to avoid being left alone with the master of Open Hand Ranch.

It was labor spent in vain, as he was speedily convinced. Whildon coldly persisted, and when once cornered, Falconer dared not attempt any further evasion, but led the way apart where none could overhear them.

"Drop that, if you please," coldly uttered Whildon, as Falconer muttered something about the failure. "I brought you here for quite a different purpose. I want you to arrange a private interview with your daughter, at once."

"But you know—if she won't—" stammered Falconer.

"She must," with sudden sharpness. "You know what I have to say to her. You know that unless she promises to be my wife, on the day I see fit to name, I will drive both her and you to worse than ruin. And knowing this, you will do just as I say, or suffer the penalty!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE WOOING.

COLONEL HUGH FALCONER shrunk back a little at those harsh words. He cast a swift, covert glance around them, not so much to reassure himself that they were alone, as to see if any curious eyes were watching their conference.

The master of the Open Hand Ranch chose to interpret the glance after another fashion, and a low, hard laugh came warningly through his thin lips as a finger tip tapped the colonel on the arm. And all the more impressive from their very blandness were the words:

"Don't waste time trying to see your way clear in that direction, dear fellow, for I frankly warn you it is no thoroughfare. I am in this game to win, and I have a trump for every card you hold. *Sabe?*"

"Speak lower, curse you!" growled the colonel, furtively dashing the drops of perspiration from his purple face. "I don't want any row with you, but if any one should happen to hear you talk that way, I'd have to shoot!"

"For fair reputation's sake, eh?" purred the rancher, seeming to find a precious salve to all his hurts in thus torturing his victim.

"What do you want me to do? Spit it out, and without any further chewing, if you want me to pull fair!"

More after his usual manner spoke the owner of Falcon Ranch, and viciously as he was feeling just then, Nash Whildon was keen enough to realize that he might push his authority too far for his own good. His manner was still hard and peremptory, but that stinging veneer was no longer used.

"I wanted first to make you comprehend how thoroughly I am in earnest in this part of the programme. I wanted to show you that if necessary I could hold your nose to the grindstone, without mercy on my part, or a chance of escape on yours. I think you understand me now."

"What I want you to do is this: Contrive to procure me a private interview with Nadine. Draw her apart from all others on some pretense, and when I come up, take yourself off when I give you the wink. If she insists on sticking to your side, then shut your ears and pretend you are a dough man."

Even then the colonel hesitated. He knew that he must obey, but it was with great reluctance. Not so much on the score of delicacy, or of consideration for the feelings of his own daughter. He felt that Queen Nadine could hold her own, even with this insolent schemer. But he knew that something had gone wrong with the woman that day: knew that she was in one of her most dangerous tempers; and he feared this enforced interview would end in an outbreak too sharp and vicious for smoothing over to his guests. And he had staked so much on winning their good favor this day!

Those keen blue eyes were watching him closely, and their owner had little difficulty in rightly interpreting the brain by the face.

"Will it smooth your path any for me to seek her out in the thick of the company? Either that, or follow the trail I've lined out for you," was his cold, unfeeling comment.

He saved the other a decision, by turning on his heel and striding rapidly away. For a moment the colonel caught his breath with a choking sensation, believing Whildon meant to act

on his threat. But then, as he saw him mingle with the cowboys instead of the guests, he took fresh grace, and set out about obeying orders.

Queen Nadine was feverishly gay, moving restlessly from point to point, dropping a laugh here and pointing a malicious barb there, until more than one of those who wondered even while they admired, would have found it no easy task to decide whether they were unusually dull, or the queen of the tournament particularly brilliant that afternoon.

Some there were who secretly smiled as they recalled the sparkling champagne of which Queen Nadine had emptied so many glasses, but they were wronging her when they placed her feverish temperature to that account. It was not her brain, but her heart.

She had cast all on one desperate play, only to lose. She had thrown her panting heart at the feet of the man for whom she entertained such a fierce, unreasoning passion, only to have it spurned as worse than valueless.

Only her imperious nature kept her from breaking down altogether during those early hours of sickening torture. Only her pride made her seek to hide her hurts under a mask of gayety.

After all, Colonel Falconer found the task set him was much more easy than he had dared to hope. Without an effort to elude him, Nadine rode away in obedience to the signal which he gave, and, though a white shade came into her beautiful face as it was hidden from the guests, her voice was clear, and steady enough, as she asked:

"He sent you—Nash Whildon?"

Falconer mumbled something, he scarcely knew what, so completely was he taken by surprise.

Nadine laughed shortly, her red lips curling. "I saw him draw you aside, and knew from his high-and-mighty manner that he was putting on the screw. What is it he wants?"

"A talk with you," he says, stammered the colonel, looking anything but comfortable. "He's bound to have it, Nadine! We've got to give him rope, unless we want a general smash-up!"

"A rope—and a noose at the other end, if he wishes," laughed the fair amazon, turning in her saddle and lifting a gloved hand in open signal to the master of Open Hand Ranch.

"You can draw out of the game if it pleases your hand best, father. I fancy I can hold this fine gentleman level."

"Don't stir him up—don't ruin all," hastily muttered the colonel as he saw Nash Whildon briskly advancing toward them. "Sing as sweet as you know how, until we can do better! He mustn't make a bad break, or—careful!"

The keen-eared rancher was too close for further speech to be wise, and Falconer tried hard to force a smile as Whildon rode up with a bow as ceremonious as though this was their first meeting that day.

"You honored me, Miss Falconer?" he said, blandly. "My wishes did not cheat my eyes?"

Nadine's lip curled with scorn at this, and there was a fire in her dark eyes that sent a shiver of fear up and down the weakened spine of the colonel. Surely she would not be so mad—so insane as to drive this merciless scoundrel to his worst?

"Did you count on disobedience when you sent your orders to me, through my father?" coldly uttered Nadine. "Drop your silken mask, Nash Whildon, and let us meet on a fair footing."

"Nothing suits me better, Nadine," was the prompt response, then turning to the colonel with: "You can take a walk, pard, and see that we are not crowded for a few minutes."

"Don't go too fast, either of you," muttered Falconer, but with his eyes fixed imploringly upon his daughter. "We'd ought to be able to fix up a combination, somehow. Try it, and—"

"As the first step, suppose you leave us together," coldly interposed the master of Open Hand Ranch.

Without venturing another word, the colonel turned his horse and rode away toward the general congregation, leaving the pair alone with each other.

"Shall we let our nags keep in motion, Nadine?" asked Whildon, in softer, more respectful tones, with a slight nod toward the merry guests. "It may keep others from paying too close attention to our movements."

"Anything to hasten your sluggish tongue, Sir Knight of the Dusty Shoulders," with a mock bow as she slackened rein a trifle and moved ahead at a walk. "As for me, I have naught to say that I would not be perfectly willing to publish in letters a yard high, for all to read!"

Nash Whildon moved along at her side, outwardly cold and composed, but with a fire glowing in his eyes that should have warned her. Whatever may be thought of his methods, no one could doubt his sincerity.

"This is not precisely the manner in which I expected to lay bare my heart to you, Nadine," he said, in measured tones. "I have spent many an hour in dreaming—"

"Is it not time you were waking up, then?"

"You will find me wide awake from this time on, my dear," with just the ghost of a smile.

"You said, or hinted, that you were not anxious to prolong our little *tele-a-tele*. If in earnest, remember that I sent for you to listen to certain words. Remember that I am not a man to be choked off easily. I will have my say, if I have to speak with the entire company for an audience!"

Queen Nadine gave him a mock bow as she sweetly uttered:

"It is better for one to suffer than for many; consider me a meek and patient martyr. But—pray condense!"

"You deceive yourself if you think you can turn this matter into a jest, my dear," smoothly retorted the rancher, without giving a sign of anger or annoyance. "It has long been serious earnest with me; and I mean to show you that your interest is to the full as deep as even mine can be."

"As a woman, with eyes and instincts as keen as woman was ever gifted with, I need not waste time in telling you how long ago I first began to love you."

"As a man, not nearly so big an idiot as he sometimes tries to make others believe through his actions, you need not be reminded that your love was fed only by your imagination," curtly retorted Nadine.

"I loved you, almost from the hour of our first meeting," coolly added Whildon, paying no attention to her interruption. "I swore then that I would never give over until I made you my wife."

"And swearing, perjured yourself!" flashed Queen Nadine.

"I laid myself out to win your love in return, with more care and painstaking than I had ever before wasted on one of your sex. I loved you better and deeper, every day, until I felt that I would be willing to give my life if I could thereby win your whole love for a single day. Was that nothing?"

"Worse than nothing—to me!"

For the first time since that strange wooing began, Nash Whildon showed signs of losing his temper. His eyes flashed almost fiercely as they met her lustrous orbs, and his voice grew hoarse and hard:

"You will have it so? All right! I thought to pave the way with smooth words, but if you prefer them with the bark on, you shall have your wish!"

"If I had that, where do you think you would be?" with a soft, yet malicious laugh as her hand pointed to the trampled ground just before them. "Lying there, where you so gracefully measured your proud length but a few minutes ago, Nash Whildon!"

The shot hit hard, despite the effort which the rancher made to cover the sting. And before he could make reply, Nadine added:

"I have listened to you, with as much patience as I could summon to my aid. Now it is time for you to hear my silvery tongue. I will be a trifle more merciful—in length, if not in matter."

"You say you have loved me from almost the first hour of my meeting with you. I say that I have hated, contemned, despised you to the full as long a period."

"You say you have sworn to win and wear me. I now swear that I would ten thousand times rather give my hand and troth to the Indian whose skill sprawled you out there, a laughing-stock for all onlookers!"

"And despite that ladylike assertion, I repeat that you shall be my wife; that you shall pretend to love me above all the rest of mankind, even if you perjure yourself in so swearing; that before we part this day, you shall be my plighted bride!"

Clear and cold came the sentences, and those blue eyes steadily met the burning gaze which Queen Nadine maintained until his voice ceased. Then, low and strained came her response:

"Dare you threaten me, Nash Whildon?"

"Since smooth words fail to win you, I am ready to make the most of my power. Call it threaten, if you like. It is truth just the same!"

Swift as thought her right hand pressed a cocked revolver fairly against his side, the action being invisible to the distant guests, owing to their respective positions, and she cried in fierce triumph:

"How now, Nash Whildon? Who holds the trump card?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VALUE OF A SECRET.

His life bung by a single thread, and Nash Whildon was keen enough to see as much. He never flinched. He made no effort to strike the deadly implement aside. He simply smiled in silent amusement which, if counterfeit, was most admirably assumed.

"You imagine you do, Nadine, from your face," he said, without the slightest tremor perceptible in his voice, even to her keen ears.

"And do I not?" she cried, almost viciously, pressing the revolver still closer until its muzzle was buried in the clothing directly over his heart. "A single contraction of my finger, and you are carrion to the eye, even as you have been equally as loathsome to my other senses!"

"And the result—to you, my dear?"

A low, mocking laugh greeted the query.

"What would the guests yonder say, you

mean! That I served a villain just right for causelessly insulting a lady!"

"And no doubt your oath would find credence," still with that peculiarly exasperating coolness. "But when the man whom I have named as my executor, in case aught should happen to lay me out before the game is fairly played to an end, steps forward with certain documents; what then?"

"Bah! so transparent a trick can't save you!"

"Then it will avenge me, which ought to be faint consolation to a man cut short in the very prime of life by the hand of a lady," smiled Whildon, with unshaken nerves, though he expected with each passing moment to feel a bullet tearing its way to his heart. "And if I am not to win you, be sure no other man will feel inclined that way, when once my last will and testament is published broadcast!"

It was a risky move, but the result justified his expectations.

Something in his manner, even more than in his words, shook the vicious resolution which Queen Nadine had almost sealed by action, and as he saw her cheeks suddenly pale, the rancher added in softer tones:

"Come, Nadine, put up your gun and show your good sense. You can kill me, but in so doing you will simply bring worse than ruin upon the heads of your father and yourself. If aught should happen to me, the hour that published my fate to the world, would bring to light full and ample proofs of your past life. Need I say any more?"

"You are lying! I can see it in your eyes!"

"And you are trying to choke down sober reason, my dear," with a low laugh, soft and smooth as velvet. "You know that I am speaking no more than the simple truth. You know that if the whole truth was told, not even your sex would prevent yonder people from turning upon you, thirsty for vengeance. And knowing this—put up your gun!"

Sharp and stern came the last words, and almost unconsciously the amazon obeyed. She lowered the hammer, and returned the weapon to its appropriate place, still gazing into his handsome face like one held by a curious spell, against which she could not even struggle.

"You were very foolish to fight against your master, my dear," the rancher said, in even, leisurely tones, as he gently signaled the horses to resume their slow movements. "You naturally hate to come down, but you can't always expect to ride your high horse. Now we'll talk business, if you will be so kind."

Queen Nadine was struggling to regain her suddenly lost nerve, and partially succeeded.

"I have heard enough for once. You have gone too far, Nash Whildon! Too far and too fast! I would have killed you—I am wondering right now why I didn't kill you—"

"Because you are too young and full of life to relish the idea of committing murder and suicide in the same breath, my dear," was the cool insertion, accompanied by a mellow laugh.

"Because I resolved that you shall make your foul hints good in the eyes of all the community before paying the penalty you deserve, rather!" with cold emphasis.

"Let it go at that, if it eases your mind, Nadine. Be sure I will not be in hiding when you or your worthy parent makes an open and public demand for documents and proofs."

"You have none—there is none!"

"May you never crowd me into laying them before the public, Nadine," with sudden seriousness that could not fail to impress her deeply, recalling, as she did, the words uttered by Colonel Falconer. "As long as I live, or until my last faint hope of winning you for a wife is utterly extinguished, the world shall be no wiser for what I have learned since my first meeting with you. But I am not a generous man. I am not one who fears or disdains to make use of any and all arguments in order to win an object on which my heart is bent. I will keep this secret sacredly until you force me to make it public property. Then—you can picture the consequences!"

"Prove your words, you cowardly calumniator!" almost hissed Queen Nadine, pale as a corpse, but with eyes that literally glowed, as though filled with liquid fire. "Show your documents, or admit that you have lied from start to finish!"

Nash Whildon laughed softly, his lips curling as he responded:

"Will you never understand, Nadine? A bit ago you insinuated that I was an idiot, but I am not quite so far gone as all that comes to. I entered this game to win. I naturally preferred fair means, for, believe me or not, I do love you as mortal man seldom loved woman before. I would give my good right hand just to be sure that you did or ever would love me one-half as wholly!"

Queen Nadine laughed shortly, contemptuously.

"That is so easy to imagine! You are acting so lovably, so gallantly, so courteously. Bah! if you must talk, talk common sense!"

"I am doing still better; I am talking the truth. I never realized what love was until I met you. I had known what I mistook for love

scores of times, I admit. But when I saw you, I learned my mistake. From that day there was but one woman in all the world for me, and you were that one, Nadine."

"I never hated myself until right now!" mocked the amazon.

"I loved you so well, that I understood your heart and head even better than you knew them yourself," he persisted, in the same subdued but intensely earnest tones. "I loved you so wholly that when I saw you were learning to dislike me, that love only rendered me more firmly resolved to conquer in the end. It was then that I began to look up your past life, to find—need I say just what?"

"Speak plainly if you must speak at all."

"I unearthed a secret which I soon saw would prove a powerful weapon in my hands. I perfected it, then laid it aside until I was forced to bring it into play. For, if I could, I wanted to win you through the power of my love alone."

"I studied you so closely that I knew, even before you suspected the fact, that you were beginning to feel an interest in—"

With a swift motion a gloved hand struck him across the lips, and panting, trembling, Queen Nadine hoarsely uttered:

"Silence, you cur! Dare to taunt me with that—"

"Let it pass, since you are still tender on that point," bowed Whildon, with a half-malicious smile. "Unless my eyes have played me false this day, I will have little further to fear on that score."

"Do you dare—"

"To think Angel Sam will shortly have a son-in-law! Why not? You will be my wife before that time, and can afford to laugh at what was, at the worst, only a passing fancy or idle whim."

It was risky work, but the master of Open Hand Ranch was resolved to show no mercy until the victory was fairly won. He half-anticipated another attempt upon his life, and held himself in readiness to foil it without permitting the distant guests to even suspect the presence of such trouble so near at hand.

But Queen Nadine only shivered as her proud head drooped lower. For the first time in all her life she began to feel as though she had met her master.

It was a sensation so new, so strange, that it seemed to benumb all her faculties save the one of wounded pride.

If Nash Whildon divined this, he made no sign. He was bent on a complete victory, and as they slowly rode on, turning at intervals in an irregular course, never passing far away from the mesa, he spoke on:

"In studying you so closely, Nadine, I learned your temper pretty thoroughly. For a woman, you could be terribly dangerous, and all the more so because a man could not well strike back; at least openly."

"I decided that there was but one way to conquer you and to gain my coveted prize: that was to carry you by storm, trusting to time and devotion to reconcile you to your fate."

"When your father proposed this affair, I made up my mind that my time had come, and arranged matters accordingly. My first move was to carefully arrange the proofs I hinted at, writing out all I had collected in addition, sealing them snugly, and then placing them in the hands of a tried and trusty friend, with strict orders not to break the seal or bring them to light until I called for them, or he learned beyond the possibility of a doubt that I was dead."

"In case of my death, he was to open and read the papers, then act in strict accordance with the directions I had inclosed. I swore him to faithfully carry out my instructions, then came here to rule or ruin as fate should decide."

"Are you thorough?" slowly asked Queen Nadine, after a brief period of silence.

"I think I have stated my case with sufficient clearness for present purposes—yes," with a cold smile.

"What is this discovery you pretend to have made?"

With a soft laugh the pointed question was parried:

"I will keep no secrets from my wife, of course. Until then—a secret let it remain, my precious!"

"And you insist on my being that wife? Do you forget that I am of Spanish blood—that I carry a knife?"

"I forget nothing, Nadine," with sudden seriousness, his blue eyes filling with powerful passion, his voice growing even tender as he added: "I am willing to force you into marrying me, simply because you decline to be won after any more gentle fashion. But when I have once fairly caged my bird, I will soon teach her to answer my tenderest love-notes, with even added fervor if that can be!"

"I would kill you before the first day was ended!" fiercely.

"I am willing to run that risk, Nadine. For one month after marriage I will leave those documents in the hands of my friend. At the end of that time I will have you so completely won that I vow you shall receive every scrap of proof in existence! Can I say more?"

Queen Nadine laughed hardly, unnaturally as she retorted:

"And you think I will consent to such a one-sided arrangement? That I will take your bare word for proof? Bah! you are mad!"

"Mad from love, if you like, but perfectly sane on all other points, as I hope to prove to your satisfaction," was the smiling retort. "I have named my terms. Your father has already agreed to them. You will do so in the end: then why not let that end come at once? It must come before the sun yonder touches the sky-line!" with sudden decision.

"It will come with your death, then. Prove to me that you are not trying to trade on an imaginary secret! Prove to me that you know a fatal step of mine in the past! No more hints: the truth!"

Impetuously Queen Nadine shot forth these words. Her great eyes glowed vividly as she turned her horse to fairly face the rancher.

The smile faded out of his face, and his tones grew cold and hard as he asked:

"What proof do you wish? My papers are, as I said, deposited in the hands of a trusty friend, who—"

An impatient gesture cut his speech short.

"You have a tongue that runs glibly enough. One word—what is this pretended secret of yours?"

"If you will be content with no less—listen!" bending forward as though fearful the light air might carry his words too far. "I know the whole truth concerning the death of Pierce Falconer, and why he was killed!"

CHAPTER XX.

A WORD OF WARNING.

It was some little time before Pink Archer could fairly extricate himself from the throng surrounding him with their hearty congratulations on his happy escape from what all conceded to be a most awkward position.

"That was the one tender point in the scheme from the start," admitted Parker Mandrake, though with a gentle sigh as he recalled his bets, which would have to be drawn as well as the contest. "And yet—I wouldn't mind seeing just such another bout, right now!"

The young foreman laughed softly, frankly. He bore no ill-will against those who had, considered from a cowboy standpoint, "rubbed dirt all over him." In a tournament of this sort, some one must lose, and he was no better than the rest.

"I dare say it was fun to look at, but—my dear fellow, if you really want to get at the bottom facts, and to taste the real flavor, go in with the boys and make part of the circus! Between you and me, it isn't half what they crack it up to be!"

Some of his bearers set this down to real or mock modesty, but Pink Archer really meant what he said. He had entered the sports simply because, as a servant, he felt in duty bound to obey the wishes of his employer. He took precious little pleasure in making an exhibition of such skill as he possessed, and he was heartily glad when the "circus" had reached its termination.

Royal Hart, with Red Clam as his constant shadow, also came in for a generous share of the praise and comments, and he seemed far more at ease under the circumstances than the young foreman. He took the many compliments almost as a matter of course, but with such a smiling, velvet grace that his new friends never once thought of charging him with vanity.

"If your horse hadn't stumbled quite so soon, though!" plaintively uttered Parker Mandrake, still wrestling with his undecided wagers. "It was gallantly done, you know, and all that, and I'd rather ten times over have lost every bet than see Pink Archer come to grief in serious earnest, but—if you had only the right, you know!"

"Curse your bets, man!" sharply cried Browning. "I was on the same line of fence, but I'm not howling. We're nothing out, and Archer is right end up. And Whildon took the first tumble! Don't be a hog, pard!"

In these words lay the key to the almost general cheerfulness. It showed how popular the young foreman was with the community, and proved how very few stanch friends the master of Open Hand Ranch could boast.

Archer was preserved from what, for a single breath, had looked like certain death. Nash Whildon was doubly defeated; he had lost his seat first of all the champions, and though a draw was agreed upon, not a man present but was free to admit that Falcon Ranch had by far the best of the struggle as far as it was permitted to go.

As soon as he could do so without actual rudeness, Pink Archer extricated himself from the friendly crowd, knowing that he would have his hands full of work before many minutes, as foreman and general director. But he was not permitted to have many minutes to himself, just then, for Royal Hart followed after.

"All right after your little necktie experience, pard?" softly laughed the yellow-haired sport, flashing a keen glance around them, like one who prefers to have no other auditors than those of his own selection.

"Right as right, thanks to you and your

"pard," frankly responded the young foreman, grasping the bronzed hand and pressing it warmly, then treating the silent Kickapoo after the same fashion. "I hardly know how you got in your fine work, it all passed so swiftly, but I reckon I'm your debtor for whole bones, if not for a life."

"Never mention it, pard; it cost us nothing," laughed the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow. "It was a dirty trick, at the best, and in knocking it endways, to say nothing of getting a white man out of the snarl, we had plenty reward."

Light though his tones were, there was something in the manner of the dashing sport that lent a double meaning to the words he uttered, and for the first time a suspicion of the black truth entered the mind of the Falcon Ranch foreman. Still, he refused to give it credence. It was too ugly, too vicious for belief!

"It might have turned out worse, but a man has got to take such things as they come. In a match like this, a fellow soon comes to think of nothing but how he can do the most for his own side. That increases the chance of accidents, of course."

This was not exactly what Pink Archer wished to say, but somehow that peculiar smile seemed to tangle his tongue all up.

"And you still think it was an accident, their getting you foul?"

"I do. At least their both catching me, and what followed."

"And it was an accident that spread you out as a carpet for the hoofs of that bull, too, no doubt?"

Pink Archer frowned a little as his eyes began to glow.

"What are you trying to get at, anyway, pard?" he demanded, with a trace of anger in his voice.

Royal Hart turned toward Red Clam, speaking quickly:

"You know how to use your eyes, pard, if your tongue is 'way below par. Am I barking along the right trail, just now?"

The Silent Kickapoo nodded his head quickly in assent.

"I thought so, but there's nothing like being positive," with a soft laugh as he cast a glance toward the serious face of the young foreman.

"Why were you so ready to use your knife on that Greaser's *riata*, pard?"

The Indian swiftly worked his fingers for a few seconds, and in a low tone the Bounding Buck interpreted his pantomime.

"Saw them miss the turn twice in succession, and knew they'd try for the charmer, eh? You hear that, pard?" turning quickly toward the really startled foreman, and speaking in more serious tones; "Red Clam saw just what I saw, and interpreted it after precisely the same fashion. It was no accident that led to your being caught in that double trap, but a cold-blooded attempt at murder!"

Pink Archer turned a shade paler, but shook his head stubbornly. He could not—would not believe it!

"It may seem so, to you, but I can't go it," he muttered.

"Was it a friend that cut your right stirrup-leather?"

"I've seen just such tricks played before, without any real malice at the bottom. This may have been such another."

"May, but was not. Let it pass, for now. Was it a joke or was it cold earnest that made those two fellows—Lazy Lupton and the Mexican—try three distinct times to catch you foul; and each time attacking you from directly opposite sides, at the same instant?"

Archer hesitated for a little before making answer. His suspicions were being confirmed, yet he fought hard against yielding to them.

"It would a little out of the common run, but those two men are among the keenest, shrewdest of all the force of Open Hand. They looked at me as a sort of chief opposed to them, and naturally made me their mark. When I laid myself open, why shouldn't they both see it? And to see a chance to count, would be enough for them to chip in."

Royal Hart laughed softly at this rather labored explanation, and renewed his grip upon that honest hand.

"You're 'way off, pard, but I can't help liking you all the better for it. Most men would jump at a chance to get even for a trip, but you blister your tongue making excuses for your enemies! Magnanimous, but mighty poor judgment!"

"Suspensions are not legal proof, and without proof positive I wouldn't accuse my bitterest enemy," quietly retorted Archer.

"All right, pard. I thought it no more than fair to tell you just what we saw. No offense, I'm hoping?"

"My heartiest thanks, instead," was the prompt response.

"Consider them recorded, pard! And now—you will keep all eyes open? If you won't believe, you will at least watch?"

"I'll try to steer clear of snags, of course."

"The sharpest, toughest, knottiest snag of all lies over yonder!" muttered Royal Hart, with a glance and barely perceptible nod in the direc-

tion where Nash Whildon was riding slowly along at the side of Queen Nadine. "He's mighty bad medicine, pard! It's his split hoof that has been stirring up all this mud. He notions you're in his way, and I'm open to bet long odds that it's his extra pay that made those two rascals so mighty keen to down you for keeps, a bit ago!"

"There's no love lost between us, I'm free to admit, but you're off the trail when you hint that I'm in his path. He has a clean field for all of me!"

"He seems bent on cutting out the running, anyway!" with a curling lip as he watched the movements of the couple beyond. "And you are in plump earnest, pard? You wouldn't kick a bit if I tried to show off my paces before those big black eyes?"

"Good luck go with you, pard," laughed Archer, frankly meeting that keen gaze. "I don't know much about you, to be sure, but anything in the shape of a man would be better luck than that smooth-tongued rascal!"

"That's hearty, and I reckon I'll hire with the old gent. Not to shoulder you out of place, though, mind ye, pard!"

"I will have no place on Falcon Ranch by this time to-morrow. If I can see you installed as foreman, I'll leave with an easier mind; but leave I am determined to, whether or no."

"I'll do my level best to fill your shoes."

"That won't be so hard," laughed Archer, with a covert glance toward the spot where Sam and Nellie Angell were preparing to take their departure. "You'll find the boys a fair lot, after they have once taken your measure; rough and tough, at times, but stuff you can count on from sun to sun, as long as you treat them white. It will come heap easier to you than I found it. They have sized you up pretty accurately already, and will be willing to meet you half-way."

Royal Hart saw that the honest young fellow hardly knew how to break off the interview without appearing too blunt, and generously solved the question by turning away with a laugh, saying:

"No time like the present, eh? Reckon I'll begin to circulate, and show the lads my best points, just for a flyer!"

Pink Archer made no effort to detain him, be sure!

He saw Angel Sam preparing the horses which had carried him and Nellie to the mesa, and lost no time in seeking the side of the blushing girl whose very shyness proved how much she prized his coming.

A frown, more of uneasiness than of anger, corrugated the weather-beaten face of Angel Sam as he saw the young couple slowly move away together, Nellie with drooping head and downcast eyes, Pink bending over her and seemingly talking with great earnestness.

"It's human natur', I reckon, but I'm wishin' it didn't crop out so mighty plain jest now! Of all the wimmen in the world, fer it to be that spit-fire!" with an almost venomous glance over the level to where Queen Nadine was confronting Nash Whildon.

Yet there was nothing very serious passing between the young foreman of Falcon Ranch and Angel Nell. Nothing that could have brought a pang of jealous rage to the heart of even Queen Nadine had she been near enough to have caught every word either uttered.

With his unusually keen sense of honor, Pink Archer felt his tongue tied as long as he remained in the service of Falcon Range. Though he felt that he had naught to blame himself for; though he knew he had never given Nadine Falconer even the faintest excuse for believing he had or ever would love her; while she remained his mistress, he could not bring himself to talk of love to another woman.

He was telling Nell how he had resolved to give up his position, and was almost timidly hinting at a visit which he hoped to make their house before many days, when a hurried footstep startled them, and they glanced around to see Angel Sam limping up, his hard features filled with mingled anger and fear as he muttered harshly:

"Pull out, young feller! It ain't white—it ain't no ways kind, the way you're gittin' the proud miss down onto my little gal, no it ain't!"

Pink Archer flushed hotly, and exclaimed:

"I am her servant only until this work is smoothed over, then—"

A sharp, warning hiss came from the old man's lips, mingling with the rapid trampling of a horse's hoofs.

CHAPTER XXI.

CLINCHING THE BARGAIN.

As those words came almost hissing through the white teeth of the master of Open Hand Ranch, Queen Nadine shrunk back, pale as death, shivering as though an icy chill had seized upon her.

Nash Whildon showed a gleam of triumph in his keen eyes as she recoiled. If he had doubted the truth of his suspicions before, he did so no longer. Only one with a guilty secret would so plainly betray it in face and actions.

"You forced me to utter the words, Nadine," he said, trying to hide his almost vicious triumph

at the effect of his speech. "You can not blame me for doing just what you dared."

Quickly as she had recoiled, just so swiftly did Queen Nadine recover herself, facing the rancher boldly, her face hard-set, her great eyes blazing defiance. And her voice, though strained and unusually harsh, showed no signs of fear as she spoke:

"Is this your mighty secret? Is this the bolt you have been so carefully forging, Nash Whildon?"

"Is it not sufficient, Nadine?"

"No—a thousand times no!" was the swift retort.

The master of Open Hand Ranch laughed softly, maliciously.

"Then your actions are mighty deceiving, my dear! For just a single breath I feared I had given you your death-blow."

"Instead, you have made an idiot of yourself," with stinging contempt in tone and face. "Instead, you have played your last trump, only to find that you had misread its face!"

"Do you really think so, Nadine?" still with that bland smile, still with that mocking light in his blue eyes. "Suppose we wait and leave our little dispute to your worthy father, who seems strangely alarmed at the length of time it takes for us to reach an amicable conclusion. If he sides with you when I tell him—"

Without taking the trouble to conclude the sentence, Nash Whildon beckoned for Colonel Falconer to hasten to the spot. He was already on the way, unable longer to restrain his brooding fears of an outbreak on the part of his fiery-tempered daughter. Disagreeable as he knew it must prove, this acting as buffer between two such hot-heads, it was far preferable to risking such a fatal unmasking as Nash Whildon might easily bring about by telling all he had discovered.

Nerved to the task, the colonel at once attacked his daughter, his voice harsh and brusque:

"Are you crazy, Nadine? Would you publish all to the world, just when we need to use the greatest caution and reserve?"

"She declares there is no secret to keep hidden," smiled Whildon. "She says there is nothing to keep hidden in that—"

"Drop it, curse you!" grated Falconer, turning white as his florid complexion would permit, one hand grasping a revolver. "Isn't it enough that I own up you've got us foul, without—"

A hard, reckless laugh from the lips of Queen Nadine cut him short.

"Talk about a woman being unable to keep a secret! Only for your folly, father, I could have fought him off to the bitter end! As it is—he was not lying when he swore that you had confessed!"

"Be frank, colonel," purred the rancher, showing his teeth. "Once for all, have I not got you foul? Don't I hold you in the hollow of my hand, to save or destroy just as sweet fancy dictates? Out with it!"

"It's the truth, Nadine," suddenly muttered the colonel, brushing a hand across his damp brow. "There's no use to kick against it. We've got to knuckle, and the less we boggle over it, the easier it will be."

"Because then I will have just as deep an interest in keeping the secret from spreading as either one of you," gently supplemented Nash Whildon. "Because I would defend my wife against the whole world besides!"

"And if I still decline to be your wife?"

"Then I will tell all I know, in tones loud enough for every ear to recognize! I will rule or ruin, as I said before!"

Colonel Falconer pressed between the two, catching the rein of his daughter's horse, turning its head about as he hurriedly uttered:

"Give me a few minutes to talk it over with her, Whildon. I'll try to bring it out all right."

"For your sake, quite as much as mine, remember!" nodded the rancher with a cold smile as he reined back his horse for a few paces.

He made no effort to catch the words that passed between the two. He felt satisfied that victory was his, and was content to wait a few minutes longer for his final triumph.

Almost savagely as he had pressed his wooing, there was love lying beneath it all; strong, ardent, passionate love such as he had never expected to feel for living being. A year ago he would have laughed at the bare idea of forcing a woman to accept his hand. Now—he cared not what means he used, just so his end was gained.

He could see that Colonel Falconer was speaking most earnestly, like one who fully realizes the serious nature of the case. He could see that, though pale, Queen Nadine was gradually losing her hot rage, and long before they moved in his direction, he believed he could see unmistakable signs of her yielding to the arguments brought to bear by her parent.

"You have thought better of it, Nadine?" he exclaimed, spurring his horse forward, his face aglow with triumph as they made a move in his direction. "You will forget all, save that I love you?"

"Forgetting does not come so easy, Mr. Whildon, but I have concluded to make the best of a mighty bad bargain, and yield to the inevitable," retorted Nadine, in a hard, reckless tone that drove the love-light from his face in an instant.

"You agree to be my wife? And when?" he demanded, coldly.

"At as distant a date as possible, of course," still in that hard unnatural tone of voice.

"We won't quarrel over that point, be sure," hurriedly interposed the colonel, dreading a loss of ground which had been so hardy gained. "It had ought to be enough for you, Whildon, to have her promise, without crowding too hardy. Let the day wait for a bit anyway."

"You have promised, then?" persisted Whildon. "You swear you will become my wife when I ask you to go through the ceremony with me?"

"I promise. I swear, if that suits you better," was the cold reply.

"Then—"

"I'll leave you two gentlemen together to agree upon the minor details," brusquely cried Nadine, wheeling her horse without paying any attention to the hand which he reached out to clasp hers.

Nash Whildon frowned darkly as he watched her dash away toward the mesa, but as Colonel Falconer tapped him on the arm, he turned back.

"It cuts mighty deep, you see, pard," apologetically. "Not that she won't come to look at it better in time, but she's got a terrible high spirit, and the best of 'em don't cotton to being driven, you know."

Falconer felt that his tongue was unusually clumsy, even for him, but he had to say something. After all, it was a pure matter of business, and sentiment could not be expected to figure gracefully in it.

"I am satisfied, since I couldn't get better terms," calmly said the Open Hand master. "I leave her taming to time, after this first lesson is fairly over. But about our wedding: the sooner that comes off, the better for all parties. As long as she is her own mistress, she will chafe and pull on the halter. When I have her fairly bound, my love will tame her the most surely."

Colonel Falconer feebly objected, but he was hardly in a position to make conditions. He knew that he was helpless, and fought with a faint heart at best.

It was now drawing quite late in the afternoon, and the guests were already thinking of making a start for their respective homes. As a matter of course they wished to say a word or two of praise for the entertainment, and Colonel Falconer was only too glad of a chance to break off the interview with this prospective son-in-law of his.

Nash Whildon offered no opposition, quietly permitting the colonel to leave him behind. There was a hard, disagreeable glitter in his blue eyes as they roved toward two figures dimly perceptible near the side of the mesa. One was a man, the other a woman.

Possibly it was this meeting, which he had noticed from the first, that made him so hard and obstinate in resolving to lose no time in making his victory complete.

He sat watching those figures until a ringing cheer from the guests announced the end of the colonel's neat little speech in response to their congratulations. Then, his white teeth showing in a cold smile, Nash Whildon rode up to the side of the Falcon Ranch owner.

"One word before we separate, ladies and gentlemen," Whildon said, his voice ringing out clear and distinct. "You have just ended one celebration, and I trust you have not entirely wasted your time. This hope and belief emboldens me to propose another meeting which, if not of the same nature, should be equally as happy—tenfold so to me."

"One week from to-night, Miss Nadine Falconer will honor me by becoming my wife, the ceremony to take place at Falcon Ranch. In her name, as in my own, I invite one and all to honor us with their presence!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FORLORN HOPE.

As Nellie and Pink turned, Queen Nadine rode briskly up to the spot, twin roses in the cheeks which so seldom wore color, a gay smile upon her lips, and her great black eyes full of animation.

Instinctively the foreman stepped in front of his shrinking companion, recalling the mad threat with which Queen Nadine had last parted from him, but if the fair amazon noticed the guarding movement, she gave no outward signs of comprehending its purport.

"Going Miss Angell? May we hope that you have not been altogether disappointed in your anticipations?"

Nellie murmured something, she hardly knew what, but evidently Nadine accepted it as favorable, for her smile grew more cordial, her tone yet more friendly and mellow.

"So pleased to hear it, I'm sure. You shy little creatures are so difficult to understand, and I—well, it was my duty, even as it is my nature, to keep on the wing. Another time I

hope to see more of you. You shrink, little girl?" with a low, soft laugh that held a pained echo to the marveling ears of the foreman.

"I am so unused to—to even the company of my own sex, Miss Falconer," faltered Angel Nell, blushing warmly as she felt the encouraging pressure which Pink Archer contrived to give her trembling hand, as he fancied, unseen by Queen Nadine.

"And I might almost say the same," still with that vague sound of pain and regret lingering in her rich tones. "Those that I have known most intimately, perhaps, were too nearly of my own wild, reckless disposition. You, little girl! If I had known you longer, better, I might have been a happier woman this day!"

Nellie was silent, and even Pink Archer knew not just what words to utter, while Angel Sam stood staring with open mouth and dazed eyes, plainly unable to credit the evidence of his own senses.

Truly Queen Nadine was that day proving herself a bewildering bundle of contradictions.

"You will come to Falcon Ranch, some day, Nellie?" she added, her full, rich tones sounding very musical indeed. "You have never been there, I believe?"

"It is so far, and then—" hesitated the girl.

"And then—the reputation which dame rumor has given the mistress forbade any wish on your part to lessen that distance!" supplemented Queen Nadine, with a laugh that sounded far more like the self which Pink Archer knew best. "But you must not believe all you hear, even—hark!" with a swift turning of her head toward the spot where Nash Whildon was just beginning his announcement of their coming marriage.

So still the air, so clear and almost painfully distinct was his voice, that not a syllable escaped the ears of the quartette under the mesa wall. Instinctively Nellie drew a little closer to Pink Archer, but for once he was hardly conscious of her presence. His eyes were fixed upon that pale face, looking as though carved out of marble. Yet, statuesque as Queen Nadine sat her horse, he momentarily expected to see a fierce outburst on her part.

Surely there could be no truth in the announcement Nash Whildon was making? So brief a time had elapsed since the woman whom he claimed as his betrothed had cast her panting heart at the feet of another!

There was so little of love or submission in that pale, proud face!

And yet, when the master of Open Hand Ranch ceased speaking, when the voices of the surprised guests were heard in more or less hearty congratulations, Queen Nadine gracefully sprung from her saddle, a smile upon her red lips as she bowed to the young couple with mock humility. And there was not a trace of mockery to be detected in her voice as she uttered:

"Strange, but true, my good friends! And from the bottom of my heart, Nellie, I trust and hope that I will right speedily have a chance to congratulate you after the same fashion. Nay, nay, little one," with a low laugh that was music itself, as Nellie shrunk back from her extended hand; "it is too late, and my eyes are too keen. That charming blush betrays your secret, and—"

She broke off abruptly, as a horse was heard rapidly approaching. She turned to confront Nash Whildon, the bright, playful smile fading from her beautiful face as by magic.

"I am not quite ready to leave, and a little longer delay will give our good friends time to prepare their pretty speeches," Queen Nadine uttered, before the rancher could open his lips. "Take care of my horse, please."

She flung him her reins, then turned her back as coolly as though the one addressed was but one of her servants whose duty it was to obey her lightest whim.

An ugly gleam came into the eyes of the rancher, but he made no reply in words. He took the reins, and moved quietly away with the animal.

Nellie gave a little shiver of mingled surprise and uneasiness. It was all so strange, so unexpected. And there seemed something unwholesome in the air.

"It's time we was moggin' to'rds home, birdy," mumbled Angel Sam, drawing his daughter toward their horses, as he indistinctly added:

"Thankin' you fer all the fun an' grub, an' sech like, mum, o' course!"

Pink Archer half turned to bear them company, but Queen Nadine touched him on the arm in token that she was not yet willing to part.

"You will lose nothing by waiting, Mr. Archer," with a curious laugh, that but served to increase his uneasy feeling. "Angel Nell will have all the more time to think over the words I dropped in her ears. Give her time, and you may find they have taken root in her heart of hearts!"

Pink Archer bowed stiffly. He did not like the situation, after what had passed between them that day, but he hardly knew how to escape without making his fears painfully conspicuous.

"I am at your service, of course, Miss Falconer, since your father refused to accept my resignation until another day. I will look after your horse, and relieve Mr. Whildon."

"Mr. Whildon is doing very well," quickly uttered the willful amazon, slipping a hand through his arm and slowly moving along the foot of the mesa. "Mr. Whildon may as well begin his apprenticeship now as an hour later. And you—have you not one word of congratulation to offer? Are you the least bit sorry to see that I am determined not to wear the willow, Pink?"

"I congratulate you, Miss Falconer," gravely uttered the foreman, ignoring the closing sentence. "I wish you all imaginable happiness."

Queen Nadine laughed shortly, irritably. "In a voice as grave and ominous as that of a raven! A blind man would fancy you lamenting over the utter ruin of a friend, instead of celebrating her ever-enduring bliss!"

Archer made no response. He felt that there were breakers ahead, and racked his brain in search of a plausible excuse for beating a retreat while he was yet clear of the reef.

Queen Nadine dropped his arm, turning until they stood face to face. The bright color was gone. Her face was white as marble. There was a wild, fierce, yet imploring light in her great eyes.

"Is it too late, Pink?" she uttered, her voice strained and harsh with the intensity of her emotion. "Must this sacrifice be made complete? Do you hate me so bitterly that you can stand by to see a man like Nash Whildon ruin my entire future?"

Pink Archer was strongly affected by her emotion, but he steadied his voice as he made reply:

"I could wish you were to wed a better man—a man more worthy you, Miss Falconer. Though but a servant, you have ever treated me kindly, generously. If sincere wishes and prayers can bring you peace and happiness, be sure they will not be lacking."

"Peace—happiness—with Nash Whildon?" and a hard, scornful laugh came through her teeth as they clicked sharply together.

So intense was the hatred, the loathing, expressed in her tones and face, that Archer was thrown still further off his guard.

"Surely that man is not forcing you into marrying him, Miss Nadine? If I thought so for a moment—"

"You would save me?" softly breathed the woman, as he broke off with an uneasy consciousness of having gone too far. "You can save me from a merciless villain, Pink! Say that you will! Say that you will have pity, and it is not yet too late!"

Now that the worst had come, Pink Archer met it, as he met all dangers, openly, resolutely. He did not pretend to misunderstand her hardly coherent sentences. He knew that only perfect frankness could avail them in this crisis, and that frankness he used.

"If I can save you by forcing Nash Whildon to eat his words, I am ready to do it, Miss Falconer. If you say the word, I will pick a quarrel with and kill him; fortunately he has this day given me plenty of excuses, so no one need know my real motive. This is the only way I see of saving you from the false step you have let him take."

Queen Nadine flung out a hand with swift impatience.

"If I sought his death, I would not need to seek another hand. There is yet another method—another way, if you—"

"None that I can take, Miss Falconer," was the grave interruption.

Her proud head bowed, and a gasping breath from her painfully laboring breast told how severely she was suffering. Pink Archer turned fully as pale, but he did not falter. He felt that there was more than his own future at stake, and firmness now was his only course.

"If it was only my own happiness, Miss Falconer, I might hesitate. But—I must say it!—there is a little girl who loves me, even as I love her. I have never told her this—never asked for her secret in return; but I know that my hopes are well founded. It would be sinning against three, were I to ask you to marry me. And I fear you would be the worst sufferer of all!"

There was a brief silence. Archer was painfully conscious that he had not spoken just as he wished or intended. But he dared not attempt to better it. The subject was bitterly painful to his sensitive, honest nature. And wild, reckless, ungoverned though he knew Nadine to be, his kindly heart fairly bled for her then.

Only a brief space of painful silence. Then, with another of the sudden and complete changes with which she had so often surprised him, Queen Nadine lifted her head, a smile upon her face, her voice clear and steady as she extended her hand:

"You are speaking of Nellie Angell, of course, Mr. Archer?"

The young man bowed assent. A shadow came into his face, as he recalled the fierce threats which Nadine had breathed against Nellie that day, and he half expected another outbreak in

the same vein. But in this he miscalculated widely.

Queen Nadine showed no further signs of agitation or passion. She looked and spoke like one thoroughly at ease.

"She is a dear, good girl, judging from her looks. I know little about her, of course, since we have met but once or twice before to-day. Still, I think she is a woman to suit you, to make your future life complete and perfect. She loves you, or her shy eyes spoke falsely."

"I will soon know my fate," slowly uttered Archer. "After to-morrow I will be free to go and come as I please. Not but that I have found my employment very agreeable, but—"

"Yes, it is better that you resign your position, after my mad folly to-day. It would hardly be pleasant for either of us to meet too often. But we will see you at the ranch before you leave?"

Pink Archer bowed assent, but before he could speak, Nadine added:

"Then I may have more to tell you. Still, let me say this much: My best, kindest wishes go with you! I trust you will meet with the reward you so richly deserve, and I offer you my congratulations in advance. As for Nellie Agell—tell her that I beg she will permit me to give the bride away! And be sure she shall not come to her husband with empty hands—to the only man in all the world whom—"

Without completing the sentence, Queen Nadine hurried away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW FALCON RANCH CHANGED HANDS.

The tournament was ended, the company dispersed.

Before taking his departure, however, Colonel Hugh Falconer sought out both Pink Archer and Royal Hart, bidding them be sure and come to the ranch on the succeeding day, when the vexed matter of the young foreman's resignation would be finally arranged.

There was considerable to do at the mesa and as a matter of course it fell to Archer to superintend the arrangements. He had a sufficient number of men detailed to do the work, and both Royal Hart and Red Clam remained to keep him company.

Nearly in the evening all matters were put in order, and the three men were seated around a comfortable, cherry fire built on the mesa.

As the foot-path was impracticable for horses, the cowboys naturally preferred camping on the level below, and none the less merry because they were plentifully supplied with food and drink, of which so great an abundance remained after the feast.

Thus it came that the trio already named were the only occupants of the mesa top, and could converse without grading their tones to suit curious ears.

Pink Archer, as might have been expected from all he had that day been called upon to endure, was inclined to gravity, but gay, glib-tongued Hart would not have it that way.

"Care killed a cat, pard, and you've only got one life. Brace up, and make believe you are chuck full of fun, even if you know it is a lie! Take example by me—a model, if I do proclaim my own title!"

He opened one of the bottles of champagne, and insisted on Archer helping him and Red Clam empty it.

"To the happy pair!" he bowed with mock solemnity. "May the lady comb the gentleman's head with a three legged stool as often as he ought to say his prayers—and that will keep them both too busy for quarreling, if the gentle Nash hopes to be saved through his devotions!"

"It is hardly a matter for jest," gravely muttered Archer. "That infernal scoundrel is not worthy to tie her shoestring!"

"I never run up against a wiser man, pard, for you agree with my private notions every time!" and the Bounding Buck nodded approvingly across the fire.

Almost unconsciously to himself, Archer was drawn on until he was talking freely about Falcon Ranch, its past as well as present. He did not suspect that he was being "pumped," for if this stranger was to find employment on the ranch, it was natural enough for him to wish for a little posting beforehand.

"I heard some one mention another Falconer to day," at length uttered Royal Hart as they sat smoking before turning in for the night. "Prince, or Price, or something of the sort. Who was he? Any relation to the old gent?"

"Pierce Falconer; the colonel's brother."

Archer grew grave and almost gloomy as he replied, but Royal Hart was not one to take a silent hint when he had anything to gain by free talk, and asked:

"Dead, I suppose? Party—name unknown to the deponent—was cracking him up as a rider such as you read about. Who was he?"

Archer roused himself up at this question, and though his manner was grave at first, he spoke frankly enough.

"The original owner of Falcon Ranch. It is a subject I never like to talk about, for in losing him I lost my best, truest friend. But as you might ask somebody for information that would come with a still worse grace, I'll tell you the whole story. Then, if you are to stop long

on Falcon Ranch, you had better let the subject rest."

"Nothing crooked, of course?" with a slight arching of his brows.

"Not to my knowledge," was the prompt response. "But the colonel has a mighty uneven temper of his own, and it cuts him deep to hear any such talk. He knows that he is not nearly as popular as his brother was, and he suspects a slur in every such allusion."

"Recorded, to be remembered in season and out," nodded Royal Hart, adding briskly; "Brother departed; what sort sort of ticket?"

Archer frowned with an impatient gesture.

"Don't make a jest of it, or you and I will play quits right here and now, stranger. Pierce Falconer was my friend and benefactor. He took me up when I hadn't a dollar to bless myself with. He nursed me when I was sick—a thousand miles from home and relatives. He could not have done more for an own son—and I a stranger, a beggar, flat on my back with a nasty fever."

"I was wrong, pard, and I beg your pardon for my carelessness. He was white, and you are right to stick up for his memory," soberly responded Hart, stretching a hand across the fire to grasp that of the young foreman.

"Let it drop. I've forgotten it already," with a faint smile.

"And the story with it, if you'd rather not recall the facts."

"Why not? You must learn them from some one, and that might as well be me. It can be boiled down without tangling up the main facts, and of course they are all you care about just now."

Knocking the ashes from his pipe, Pink Archer embraced both knees with his clasped hands, gazing into the fire as he talked.

"You say you are from down country, but you must know something about the troubles we have had in this quarter with the rustlers and raiders. Not so much of late years as before my time, but still frequent enough to make a man keep his weather eye open when the sign is right."

"As I said, Pierce Falconer picked me up and set me on my pins again, after I had about abandoned all hopes of a more comfortable future than a wooden overcoat under ground. He did more; he put me on his ranch, first as a sort of aide, then, as I grew stronger and more of a man, giving me the position I have filled up to this day."

"One night a heavy raid was made on Falcon Ranch, as well as several others at the same time; Open Hand among them. It was a big affair, and the rascals who engineered it, came from down country—from across the Grande, you understand?"

"The trick was well played, and almost lost beyond recovery when we dropped to the facts. When we did get our eyes open, be sure we lost little time in getting to work the best we knew how."

"It was my first practical experience with that sort of cattle, and being foreman, I naturally held myself responsible for the loss; at least, in a great measure. That drove me fairly wild, and kept me from weakening, as I might have done otherwise."

"Yes," drawled Royal Hart, blandly gazing through the fragrant blue curls of smoke from his pipe. "You look cut out for a coward."

Archer flushed a little, but made no comment.

"With a few of my lads I run up against a gang of the rustlers, and in the row that followed, I got laid out with neatness and dispatch. When I came to myself, it was broad day, and I couldn't lift a hand to help myself. Only for this bit of crooked luck, I might have been with my friend and master when he was killed—to share his fate or have saved him!"

"He was killed, then?"

"Yes. He was joined by a number of others, and they had several brushes with the raiders, though they were not strong enough to whip them out and out. They had sent out for help, and tried all they knew to hamper the gang until aid could reach them. This they did, and so saved the greater part of the stolen stock, though the river was in sight when the reinforcements came up."

"Pierce Falconer, who had lost some of his best men during the skirmishing, unfortunately let his temper run away with him, and followed the raiders as they fled across the ford. Some of them turned upon him, shooting him dead."

"His brother, the present owner of Falcon Ranch, with a few men, followed down the river, and managed to recover his body. It was so horribly mangled, and the distance so far, that they buried him near the spot where his remains were recovered."

"It cut me deeper than my hurts when I learned his fate, but as the colonel legged me to stay with him, filling the same position, until he could fairly get the hang of matters, I consented. And so, naturally, I lingered on until the present time."

"Then those two were living with their brother and uncle at the time the raid was made? Had an interest in the place, of course?"

"They had not been here very long. As for an interest in the ranch, I hardly think it. Still,

as the relatives of the owner, they naturally came in for the whole property."

"Then Pierce Falconer didn't will the place to them?"

Archer stared open-eyed at the speaker, whose voice had a peculiar echo as he asked this question.

"I heard or saw nothing of a will; but what matter? As his nearest of kin, they naturally were his heirs."

"What's the matter with his wife and children? Where do they come in at?" coolly demanded Royal Hart.

"Wife and—I never knew he was married!" gasped Archer.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"YOU ARE A MARKED MAN!"

ROYAL HART uttered a low whistle, his brows arching more than ever as he stared across the fire at his startled companion.

"And you knew him well, Horatio?"

"As well as though he were my own father, for nearly five years!" was the instant response. "And you claim to know him even better?"

There was a barely perceptible hesitation before the answer came.

"I began to believe I did, but now I'm not half as sure. I once knew a man called Pierce Falconer, but he was married and had one child toward a family of his own. The name is not so very common, and I naturally got the couple mixed up—if there really were a couple?"

Royal Hart spoke glibly enough, but there was a half-hidden eagerness in his eyes as he uttered the last words that brought a faint smile to the face of the young foreman.

"You'll have to look further, pard. Your man and my friend couldn't be the same."

"The one I'm thinking about was a trim-built, wiry little fellow, with hair and eyes as dark as those of Red Clam, yonder."

"The man I knew was tall, broad shouldered, with a hundred and eighty pounds of sinew, bone and muscle," laughed Archer, now fully recovered from the shock he had received.

"That settles it, then!" nodded Royal Hart, replenishing his pipe and settling back with an air of lazy comfort. "Nothing like coming to hard-pan. Care killed a cat, you know, and I was really beginning to pine away through pure curiosity—I should say benevolent solicitude on behalf of the supposed disinherited kids! But, of course, if your Pierce Falconer was an old bachelor, that lets him out."

"I knew him for nearly five years, and during all that time I never heard him mention having been married," gravely uttered Archer. "He was rather peculiar about some things, but he seemed to trust and even to like me—"

"Wonderful!" softly ejaculated Royal Hart, mock surprise filling his handsome face. "Really took a fancy to you? The poor fellow must have escaped from some lunatic asylum!"

Archer paid no attention to the words, even if he fully comprehended their purport. He sat gazing into the glowing embers, talking more to himself than to his new friends.

"I think he would have mentioned his marriage, even if death had long since bereaved him. If he had, I would surely have remembered his words. No—I could almost take oath that that Pierce Falconer was never married!"

"Case of two men with one name, no doubt," carelessly commented the Bounding Buck. "If they had been the same, it stands to reason that the wife and kids would have put in an appearance long before this, to share the loaves and fishes. There has been time, I take it?"

"The raid took place more than a year ago."

"Seems to me I can recall something about it, come to think, though just then I was in a mighty desolate part of the universe my own self. But that don't count. You say the present boss was among the party that recovered the body? He was living here, then?"

"And had been, for some little time," with a curious glance into the face of this persistent questioner.

Royal Hart was quick to note this awakened curiosity, and frankly encountered it, leaning forward and speaking in lowered tones:

"You think I'm taking heap interest in the matter, pard? Well, you ain't so far off the trail! I want to learn all I can about my future bosses, of course, but I've got still better reasons back. Will you take me on trust for a few days?"

Pink Archer met those blue eyes for a few seconds in silence; then made reply:

"I don't pretend to understand your meaning, but I'm willing to own that I believe you are square, from the ground up! And believing that, I'll answer all the questions you see fit to ask, so long as they don't call for a breach of confidence on my part."

"Now that's hearty, and I'll mark it down among my mental memoranda to your credit, pard," nodded the yellow-haired sport, his face growing graver as he added: "You are sure there was no cold deck rung in on Pierce Falconer? You have no doubt the present owner was really his brother?"

"Pierce Falconer received and introduced him as such."

"Then of course they must have been the pure quill. Of course the young lady was with her father when he first put in an appearance?"

"They came together, yes. I met them on the way, and guided them to the ranch itself. Naturally I felt a little curious—"

"That goes without saying," laughed Royal Hart.

"And so I took closer notice of the manner in which they were received than I might have done had I not acted as their guide."

"Affecting? Long-lost brother style, eh?"

"Cordial enough, but Pierce Falconer was never very demonstrative. He introduced them to me, calling one his brother, the other his niece."

"That straightens the record, sure enough!" nodded the yellow-haired sport, with an air of satisfaction on his handsome face that but added to the enigma in the mind of the young foreman, who looked for disappointment instead, though it would have puzzled him to have explained just why he should. "And you are perfectly sure, pard, that you haven't any tender gone-ness in that quarter? You are confident you're out of the game for good? Won't chip in any more?"

"If you mean—"

"Which I certainly do," laughed Royal, as the other hesitated.

"I never had any pretensions in that quarter," coldly.

"That leaves me foot-free, then, and if our sweet-scented neighbor who brands his horns by slapping them on the quarter with an outstretched paw, don't get a right royal shaking up for the prize he flatters himself is good as won, I'm a top-eared cripple with a broken horn! Not that I'm land or cattle hungry, mind ye, pard! But it would be a burning shame to stand by and see that 'scape-gallows carry off such a glorious prize! I've got to chip in, you see! Have I? Can't help it?"

Archer laughed at the almost ridiculous earnestness displayed by this stranger from Mexico, and Royal Hart joined in with him, not a bit abashed. If he entertained a good opinion of himself, at all events he was not afraid to let others know it.

"It fills my heart to slopping over with joy to have your assurance that you don't intend to chip, pard," he laughed. "You've had the inside track for so long, you see, it wouldn't be an easy matter to freeze you out if you were in earnest. Brother Whildon seemed to take that view of the case, only looking at it through a more serious pair of glasses. If not—Pard, though you try to blind yourself to the fact, you're a marked man!"

The abrupt transition from gay to grave startled Archer. Royal Hart was deeply in earnest as he leaned across the little fire, his eyes all aglow.

"Whildon has got it in for you, and only for good luck and a suspicious nature on my side this day, you wouldn't be here now."

Archer frowned, shaking his head slowly.

"I can't think as you do, pard. It simply happened so, just as it might have happened to any other man."

"Provided that man stood in your shoes—precisely. You know what I told you down yonder, about your stirrup-leather? Red Clam has told me he saw that slouching rascal, Lazy Lupton, fooling about the horse you rode. The chief didn't think anything of it then, for there was nothing to show whose animal it was."

"Still, that don't convict Whildon. Lupton never did fancy me."

"While his master is over head and ears in love with your humble self—precisely! It looked like it, when his two knaves were trying their level best to whip-saw you in the free-for-all."

"Drop it, if you please, Hart," gravely uttered the young man. "It is not such an agreeable subject. And even if you could prove the complete truth of your suspicions, how would that better my case? After to-morrow I will be free to go and come as I please. I am no longer in his way, even in fancy."

"So you know, but will he think as much? Even if he believes he has corraled the main prize, won't he feel safer if he makes sure all his slips are snugly covered over?"

"I don't just understand your meaning, pard."

"Then I'll use still plainer English. I believe that Nash Whildon set his tools to work your death or crippling. I believe his money paid for the cutting of your stirrup-leather. I believe he hired Lazy Lupton and Osorio the Roper to murder you during the free-for-all. And I feel confident that he will not rest quiet even now. I tell you, pard, you are a marked man! You are being hunted to the death, either through jealousy, or for some other cause just as powerful. And unless you are on guard all the time, they'll rake you in from taw, dead sure!"

"I can't think the same way you do, but I thank you for your kindly warning. And—if only to please your fancy, pard—I'll sleep with one eye open and a hand on trigger until I pull out of this region," lightly added the young

man, rising to his feet and stretching himself with a lazy yawn.

The Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow was silenced, if not wholly convinced, and dropped the subject then and there.

But little more conversation was indulged in, for time was passing, and there was early rising for the morrow to be remembered.

The cowboys below were still astir, and plainly enjoying themselves when the foreman descended to give them a friendly warning. He was forced to drink a night-cap with them, before returning to the mesa top, where Royal Hart and Red Clam had already completed their simple arrangements for retiring.

With saddle for a pillow, and saddle blanket for covering, it did not require much time to get in readiness for sleep.

The night was warm enough to render a fire unnecessary, but Royal Hart or his red pard had replenished it freely, and the bright glow was playing over their recumbent forms when Pink Archer returned from his tour of duty below.

A few moments later he was lying quite as still as they, dropping asleep almost immediately.

Time crept on. The fire began to burn low, its bright glow contracting by gentle degrees until the figures of the trio lying on the mesa top were barely perceptible.

The cowboys on the level, remembering the friendly warning of the foreman whom they loved fully as much as they respected, dropped off one by one, until complete silence reigned over the place.

It was long past the turn of night when a snake-like head was lifted above the rear wall of the mesa; snake-like in action and silence, if not in shape.

Through the gloom cast by the overhanging trees, twin-eyes gleamed like those of a prowling cat, and without a sound to betray its progress, a lithe, slender figure crept up over the escarpment, flattening itself out on the grass, slowing moving its head from side to side as those greenish eyes strove to penetrate the shadows which hung about the dimly glowing camp-fire.

There was no blaze, and the living coals were coated over with gray ashes. They gave forth only a ghostly light, barely sufficient to betray the recumbent figure which lay directly between the embers and that ugly phantom of the night.

Inch by inch, foot by foot the human snake crept along over the grassy carpet, one hand clutching a murderous knife, the other carefully and silently clearing away each and every obstacle in front that could by any possibility betray its progress.

Twice the crested head flattened to the ground as there came a slight stir from the shape by the fire, only to move on as quiet reigned once more. Only the restless movement of one whose sleep is broken by dreams—phantoms of the exciting events of the day.

Then—a sharp, vicious cry rung out through the night, and Pink Archer sprang to his feet, hand on revolver as he glared about him.

To utter a cry of angry wonder as he distinguished two figures that seemed but one as they fought desperately at his feet!

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW THE ROPER CUT THE KNOT.

BEFORE he could make another move, the two men rose upright, one standing erect, while the other kept on rising until he writhed at arm's length above the other's head. One instant, then he was hurled to the ground with a force that seemed enough to shatter every bone in his body!

"Touch lightly, pard!" cried the clear voice of Royal Hart, as a bright light shot from a dark lantern full upon the scene, showing Red Clam standing with one foot pressed upon the back of the creeping assassin. "Don't shut off his wind too quick!"

Archer pushed the foot away, turning the body over, to utter a low exclamation of surprise as he recognized the face:

"The Roper!"

"And here's his sting," grimly chuckled Hart as he picked up a long, ugly blade. "Yet you won't be convinced! Even now I wouldn't mind laying odds you are trying to explain in your mind how the fellow could have wandered so far—in a fit of sonnambulism!"

Archer drew back as the yellow-haired sport bent over the captive and deftly robbed him of his weapons. He shivered a little as he saw the Mexican stir, uttering a low gasping groan as of one on the point of death. And he involuntarily stretched out a hand to check Royal Hart as he saw him clutch the Mexican by the throat with vicious grip.

His own hand was intercepted by Red Clam, who shook his head vigorously. And the Bounding Buck grated:

"Will you? Play 'possum? Not any, my gentle sleep-walker!"

Even as the words passed his lips, the Roper made an eel-like twist that almost freed himself, then struggled furiously to escape. It really seemed as though that terrible fall had

failed to injure him in the least: most assuredly it had not crippled any of his limbs.

Red Clam sprang to the assistance of his pard, and in a marvelously short time the Mexican was bound hand and foot.

All of this passed so rapidly that the cowboys below, aroused by that wild-beast-like cry and the sounds of the struggle which followed, had not fairly gained the mesa top when Royal Hart hurriedly muttered:

"Give them a bluff, pard! Keep them downstairs until we've time to squeeze this night bird a bit. No need to let any more into the secret than we have to, you know!"

It was too late to blind the cowboys to at least a portion of the truth, but Archer said just enough to force their retreat, promising to make all clear to them in good time. And so well had he maintained discipline over his men that now he was obeyed without a question.

When he returned to the camp-fire, he found it blazing up freshly, and Osorio the Roper resting in a sitting posture against the trunk of a convenient tree, where the ruddy glow fairly revealed his features.

Grim and forbidding in its rat-like viciousness, and even the naturally sanguine Hart felt that it would be no easy matter to force a truthful confession from their captive.

Red Clam, talking with his nimble fingers with Royal Hart for an interpreter, quickly explained what had happened. He had been awakened by a start and muttering on the part of the foreman, and happened to catch sight of the assassin only a few yards away. He watched until he saw the phantom-like shape rise above the sleeping foreman, knife in hand, plainly about to commit murder. Then he sprang upon him, knocking the glittering weapon from his hand. The rest, they had seen.

"And now, my gentle sleep-walker," added Royal Hart, squatting in front of the prisoner and emphasizing his words with nimble finger.

"What have you to say for your sweet self?"

"That it is all a mistake—all a foul lie," grated the Mexican with a vicious show of his yellow fangs.

"This is your knife?" holding the gleaming blade up in the firelight. "You meant to stab Pink Archer to the heart, or was it to slit his throat?"

A sudden and complete change came over the captive. His fierceness turned to stolid indifference, so far as outward seeming went.

"Bah! what matter?" he muttered, with a sullen flash of his beady eyes into the stern face of the man whose death he was charged with having attempted. "It is so. I meant to kill the devil."

"And so turn parricide?" softly laughed Hart, with curling lip. "But I'm talking of an entirely different character, understand. You are charged with attempting to murder my friend, Pink Archer. Who hired you to use the knife on him?"

With swift directness came the question, but if he hoped to catch the Mexican off his guard, he was fated to be disappointed. The reply was prompt enough, but not just what was expected.

"It is even so. I tried to kill Senor Archer. But hire—bah! It was not gold, but revenge. It was justice—see? He killed my own brother. Is not that enough to point my knife? Yes!"

"When and where and why?"

"It matters not. I repeat—he killed my brother. I swore before the holy Virgin to have blood for blood, life for life! I tried, and failed. That is my misfortune. Gold? Bah! I spit upon gold!"

"The woods are full of just such liars as you, Roper," coolly retorted the yellow-haired sport, running a thumb gingerly over the razor-like blade. "See how much straighter I can shoot, even with my eyes shut. You never had a brother. If you did, he was never killed. If killed, he died of hemp-disease. And that polishes off his number one."

"You were hired to slit the throat of Pink Archer; for nothing less tempting than gold—plenty of it too—could have led you to such long chances after the specimens you had this day of our quality. Now, what we want to get at next is, who hired you?"

Osorio the Roper contented himself with a silent shrug of his wiry shoulders. Royal Hart laughed softly, pleasantly.

"You believe in the old saying, that a silent tongue never hung its owner, I see. But that don't always work as it ought, unluckily for men of your caliber. I might sling that other, about singing birds, but if I can't be original, I'll be as original as I can."

"You were caught in the act, and you know what the penalty for such a crime is. The boys peeping over the escarpment, yonder, would be only too happy to enlighten you on that point. But I'm in a merciful humor, to-night, and I'll save your worthless neck if it lies in the wood."

"Confess freely who hired you to murder Pink Archer, and I'll save your neck from the rope. How is it, Roper?"

The Mexican gave another shrug, with a harsh laugh of scorn.

"It is you who lie, row! I see death in your eyes, though you try to mask them. It is well

enough. Why not? I deserve death for being such a clumsy blunderer! My steel was at his throat, and yet there is no red stain on its blade! Bah! it is time I retired. Where is your rope, cursed Gringo?"

"You are a tough nut, eh?" blandly laughed Royal Hart, with a swift gesture waving Pink Archer back as he seemed on the point of interfering. "You flatter yourself that we can't begin to crack you? That is very simple on your part, my dear fellow, for you are old enough and ugly enough to know that there is nothing on earth that we cursed Gringos can't bring about when once we set our minds in good earnest."

"For instance: If you persist in trying to keep your tongue tight locked, we can unjoint it. Here is a fire: not very extensive, to be sure, but what there is of it is mighty hot when put in tender spots. Not that I am actually yearning to toast you, but—*who* hired you to put Pink Archer out of the way?"

"You, Honorable Excellency!"

Despite his coolness, Royal Hart gave vent to an angry ejaculation that brought a sardonic smile to those rat-like features.

"Am I mistaken?" he murmured, with an exaggerated arching of his jetty brows. "Then it was *not* you, *senor*. I will try to think of some other person. It is all the same to me!"

"Suppose you look closer home, Roper," with recovered coolness. "Suppose you rack your brain until you can recall the simple truth. I know it is expecting almost too much of you, but when a man is drawing so near his latter end, a change is often beneficial. Try the truth, just for a change. You have a master. His name is—?"

Royal Hart left a hiatus, but Osorio did not seem in haste to fill it with the name of Nash Whildon. Once more he was cold and sullen, his voice hard and almost emotionless as he spoke:

"It is that way your eyes are turned? Look on, if it pleases you. What matter to me? I failed. I am ready to pay the penalty. Such a clumsy blunderer has no right to live longer."

"There's more truth than poetry in that, for a fact, but I'll make you a solid offer, just for luck! Tell us just who hired you to do this bit of bloody work. Betray your employer, and you shall skin out of this with a whole hide and a sound neck. Take your time to think it over, Roper. Even a rascal like you is not apt to be in love with death such as awaits you if you refuse to accept this last chance."

For a few moments the Mexican drooped his eyes, and appeared to be seriously weighing the point in his mind. Royal Hart flashed a look of "im exultation" into the pale face of the foreman, for he felt that his wished-for end was as good as gained.

"You say that, but I can look on the other side and see more," the Roper slowly, coldly uttered, a vivid gleam filling his little eyes. "If it was true as you hint, if it was true that a master hired me to do this work, what would follow after if I betrayed him? What would my life be worth when he came to know that I had sold him to his enemies? Not a *tlaco*!"

Royal Hart laughed harshly, his eyes flashing keenly.

"Tell the truth, and your master will have his hands full in guarding his own life, without time to waste a thought on *you*!"

"That is so easy to say!" sneered the Mexican, showing his discolored teeth. "The lie I don't mind. A man is worse than a fool that refuses to speak a lie when it can serve him. But—the punishment!"

"Nash Whildon hired you to do this work! Out with it, you dog!"

"It is *you* that said so, not I, *senor*," with another meaning shrug. "I am not such a fool. You can kill me once, if I remain still. If I were to betray my master—if it was true what you hint—he would kill me ten thousand times over, even though his own hand was held too tight by you for it to lift one finger! And so—you see *senor*?"

"Is it that you are biting off your own nose, Roper," with painfully cold tones as he rose to his feet. "Have it so if you prefer. You shall tell the truth, all the same!"

He drew his companions aside, leaving the assassin at the foot of the tree to his own reflections.

"As long as our eyes are upon him, the stubborn rascal will try to bluff his way out," he muttered, when fairly out of earshot. "A few minutes spent in sober thought will do no more to fetch him around our way than all the threats we can hammer him with while his blood is hot."

"I'm not so sure," hesitated Archer, his brows gathering. "After all, is not his story reasonable enough? I may have killed a brother of his, in some of those raids, you know!"

"And Nash Whildon may be an angel, but if so he takes precious good care to hide his wings," laughed Royal Hart. "Confound it all, man! will you never open your eyes to the plain truth? Will you wink and blink on, like an owl in the sunlight, until that cold-blooded rascal gets in his pretty work and your eyes are opened—in paradise?"

Archer made no reply, for just then the voice of their captive came to their ears, and with a smile of triumph Hart hastened back.

"You have thought better of it, then? Wise man!" with a laugh.

Even now Osorio the Roper seemed to hesitate, muttering softly:

"You swear I may go free? You swear to guard my life if I tell?"

"If you tell the plain truth, I swear all you can ask."

"Then—stoop nearer, *senor*," with a shiver as he nodded slightly toward the spot where the cowboys were eagerly watching. "If they hear, he would learn in time to set his tools on my track, and—"

In his eagerness Royal Hart bent close over the captive—only to leap back with an oath as a hand snatched a revolver from his hip!

And with a mocking laugh, Osorio fired a bullet through his own brain!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FIRST FRUITS OF VICTORY.

THE forenoon was still quite young when Nash Whildon rode away from Open Hand Ranch, looking far more like a "gentleman farmer" from many a mile nearer the rising sun, than what he claimed to be, a cattle baron on his native heath.

If he saw the furtive wink which one cowboy sent at another—and little escaped those cold blue eyes of his—he made no sign of annoyance or embarrassment at that facetious signal. Why should he? He had publicly announced his speedy marriage, and there was no longer a secret connected with his courtship.

"A secret, but none for outsiders!" flashed through his brain at that thought. "A secret that has well-nigh won me the prize I've been playing so long and earnestly for!"

Dressed with unusual care, though he was always rather fastidious on that score. Looking younger far than his actual years, without a line to show for the hard struggles of the day last past, Nash Whildon rode briskly along over the gently rolling plain in the direction of Falcon Ranch, to pay his first visit to Queen Nadine as her betrothed.

"It's a toss-up how my lady will greet me," he muttered, with a low, soft laugh that contrasted sharply with the fire that leaped into his eyes. "Whether she will beg me to gaze into her revolver, or her glorious eyes! And it is just this delightful uncertainty that adds the needed spice to my daring courtship!"

The Open Hand owner was a brisk rider as a rule, and this day he seemed particularly anxious to reach his destination. The distance was not extreme, measured after the expansive Texas fashion, and long before the sun reached its meridian the buildings of Falcon Ranch came into sight.

Of course these were nothing new to Nash Whildon, but as Queen Nadine had persisted in declining his escort on the night before, this was the first time his gaze had rested on them since he felt assured of ultimately possessing the whole.

"For queen as she calls herself, Nadine will find me a king; her lord and master in sober truth!" came half-exultantly, half-viciously from his curling lips.

Many a long year had passed away since the main buildings were erected; more years than the present master of Falcon Ranch had numbered, though considerably past the prime of life.

The main building was outwardly just what it had been for ages, for aught any of those now on the place could say to the contrary. The walls were of adobe, several feet in thickness, of but a single story in height, and with the flat roof which forms the prominent feature of nearly every Spanish house on this side of the globe.

Pierce Falconer purchased both building and the greater part of the estate from a Spanish-Mexican, who found it growing uncomfortable with so many Americans settling as "neighbors."

While leaving the hacienda materially unchanged, save as to its interior, Falconer had added such buildings without as seemed convenient or necessary. Little by little this was done as his experience grew, and bit by bit he extended his limits until the ranch was noted far and wide as being a model stock farm, quite as large as any one man could handle with profit.

"So they say," smiled Nash Whildon, as something of this flashed across his busy brain. "But wait a bit! Wait until the two ranges are welded into one, and I'll open some of these slow coach's eyes!"

His further reflections were cut short by the glimpse which he caught of a feminine figure on the house-top. It called for no second glance to recognize Queen Nadine, and as her face turned in his direction, off came his hat and down sunk his blonde head in a profound bow.

When it rose again, the figure had vanished, but if Whildon felt stung by this evident slight, he showed no signs of it outwardly.

Turning his steed over to a slouching, cat-footed Mexican who came skulking out of a stable, the rancher strode briskly through the

old archway, no longer filled by the iron-studded gates of the former regime, emerging from the vaulted passage into the courtyard inclosed on all sides by the building itself. Here he hesitated for an instant, seeming in doubt which door to use, but having his indecision ended by a clear, cold voice:

"Welcome, Mr. Whildon! Will it be too much to ask you—"

A glance showed him from whence that voice proceeded, and light of foot as the most ardent lover of more romantic days, the master of Open Hand Ranch rendered further speech unnecessary by springing up a narrow flight of steps which led to the *azotea*.

"I have succeeded in a more difficult flight, my glorious queen!" he exclaimed, his handsome face lit up with passionate love as he rose before Nadine Falconer. "I have mounted to you, and—"

"Guard your footing well, for a slip might easily prove fatal!"

Though the retort came with a musical laugh and an arch glance as Nadine stepped back with proud head slightly inclined to one side, her great eyes just peeping over the silken fringe of her half-unfolded fan, Nash Whildon felt that it only half concealed a menace.

"If I fall, so much the worse for others, my dear," he laughed, just showing a glimpse of his white teeth through the blonde hair that shaded his lips. "For those I love most would surely share my fortunes, for evil as well as good."

A fiery glitter shot into the big black eyes, and Nadine demanded:

"Surely that is not intended for a threat, Mr. Whildon?"

"No more than your own words, my queen. Why should there be anything like threats or double meaning between us, Nadine? Surely we had enough of that yesterday!"

"In which you were the principal offender, unless my memory plays me false," was the swift retort.

"Yesterday is not to-day," with a low laugh.

"Yesterday is dead, and with it is buried all but the agreeable. When my thoughts turn back so far, they can only remember one thing: that yesterday you gave me a promise of marriage!"

"And feeling yourself so unworthy, you doubted your good fortune on awaking! Is this the reason for your atrociously early call, Mr. Whildon?" maliciously laughed the perverse lady, seeming even more bewitching behind her fan than when in equestrian costume.

"Unworthy goes without saying," was the cool retort, as the master of Open Hand Ranch deftly possessed him. If of her free hand, lifting it to his lips with a warmth that overbalanced his affected humility. "Unworthy to tie your shoe-latchet, but bold enough to hold fast all the gods have offered me."

It was with a quick gleam in his blue eyes that he uttered the last words, more than half-expecting an outbreak of pride on her part; but Queen Nadine had evidently been schooling herself during the hours which had intervened. She withdrew her hand, but it was with a smile that robbed her action of its sting. And when she spoke again, her tones were softer, more agreeable.

"Your most potent weapon is your tongue, Whildon, if you could only remember to use it thus deftly all the time. If—but, as you say, yesterday is dead. Let it remain buried for all time."

"With all my heart, Nadine. I was cruel then, but I believe the day will come when you will give me free and sincere thanks for that very harshness. If not, it will not be because my love—"

"Once more, let it go!" with just a shade of her old-time temper. "A woman of my nature can never forgive until she can forget; and you read me a terribly severe lesson yesterday."

Nash Whildon hesitated, like one unwilling to completely abandon the subject, but his face brightened up perceptibly as Queen Nadine added:

"Of course we must touch on the little affair that lay at the bottom of it all. The first and most important point is to have a complete and thorough understanding with each other. But the manner in which you won that promise—no!"

"It is a promise, Nadine!" he eagerly whispered, one arm stealing about her round waist as she stood close to the parapet that shielded the action from any curious eyes below. "You are ready and willing to repeat that oath?"

With a swift, deft movement Nadine slipped out of his half-embrace with a warning frown as she cast a quick glance over the grounds below. But there was a smile on her full, red lips as she responded:

"It was an oath; why repeat it now?"

"Because it is so hard for me to believe that, after so many days of hopeless pursuit, I have caught my bird of paradise at last."

Of one thing there could be no doubt. Nash Whildon really loved the fair amazon, despite the manner in which he had thought fit to speed her wooing. There was nothing counterfeit in his words, his tones, or in the ardent light that flashed from his blue eyes. Of the earth, earthly, it may have been; but such love as his evil

nature was capable of feeling, that love was all for her.

Queen Nadine saw this: she was a woman, and quick-sighted. And if this passionate love was not winning upon her, then she was a most skillful actress.

"Is it worth all your trouble, all your plotting and scheming, Whildon?" she murmured softly, her magnetic eyes fairly thrilling him through and through as they met his over the slightly fluttering fringe of her deftly manipulated fan.

A swift movement again foiled him, and with a low, musical laugh the enchantress whispered:

"Will you never remember, Nash? There are keen eyes on every side, and—I am not yet your wife!"

"But you will be? You will marry me just as I dared to announce to the company yesterday? You will keep your oath, Nadine?"

"As I said then, so I repeat now," was the slow, grave reply. "I will marry you on the evening you named, unless you change your mind and fail to keep the appointment."

Nash Whildon drew a long breath of intense relief. Until now, despite the strong hold he had upon both Nadine and her father, he had not dared feel certain of his victory. He knew her passionate nature so well. He knew that she was reckless of everything when once her temper was awakened. He had expected to use coaxings, not unmingled with threats before fairly coming to an understanding. But now!

"Then Heaven nor earth can prevent your becoming my wife, Nadine!" he uttered, his emotions so powerful that his tones were hardly articulate, and he felt forced to clasp his hands tightly behind his back in order to conquer the mad temptation to fold her lithe figure in his arms and thus taste the first fruits of victory. "I would keep that appointment even though dead and buried!"

Nadine shivered, and the flush faded from her cheeks as though an icy blast had flashed across her person. She forced a little laugh, but it was unnatural and contained precious little mirth.

"You are not near so nice, now! Is it the way of you Gringos, to make love by talking of graves and corpses? It is not at all nice! If you do not at once beg my forgiveness, I will leave you to talk to the plants—or send up to you my maid, Felipe! She is growing what you call—ascetic, not?"

Nash Whildon laughed softly at her affected idioms, but was by no means displeased. Carefully as he had schooled himself on the road, he was rapidly losing his head. This reception was so much more cordial than he had dared even picture in his dreams.

Nadine turned away with an affected pout, her great eyes roving over the plain, as they had more than once since that interview began.

Now she gave a perceptible start, and shading her eyes with her fan, she gazed keenly at an approaching body of horsemen, seemingly forgetting the presence of the rancher.

A frown came into his face as his eyes followed hers, for he at once knew, from the direction, that this party must be from the mesa. And instantly all his savage suspicions returned in full force.

"Are you trying to recognize Pink Archer, Miss Falconer? Wouldn't it be just as well if you were to wait a few moments longer?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROYAL HART TANGLES THE TRUTH.

QUEEN NADINE turned with flashing eyes and sharp voice:

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Whildon?"

"Your eyes," with a half-mocking bow.

"Why strain them at such a distance, when by waiting a few minutes you can learn all you wish without running any risk?"

Even before he finished speaking, Queen Nadine turned to the parapet, again gazing keenly, even anxiously, out over the plain toward the slowly advancing horsemen. All her acting was forgotten now. She felt a strange oppression at her heart. Something seemed to warn her of impending evil or dark misfortune, though she was wholly at a loss when she tried to analyze that sensation.

Cold, frowning, with an evil gleam in his blue eyes, Nash Whildon stood by her side, gazing at the approaching party. His hands were tightly clinched at his side. His nostrils seemed pinched, showing a double white line near the tip.

A brace of minutes thus, then Nadine caught her breath with a gasp.

"Something has happened! Look! what means that strange figure in their midst? Where is Pink Archer? I see him not."

As the party drew slowly nearer, a strange object became visible. A figure on horseback, but with a strangely horrible appearance. A figure that was plainly that of a human being, sitting erect in the saddle, but seeming to lack a head.

For one instant a fiercer glitter filled the blue eyes of the master of Open Hand Ranch. A look of diabolical joy swept across his face, only to vanish and leave a cold, emotionless blank as Nadine turned to him with those agitated ejaculations.

"Possibly he has gone to pay his lady-love a visit. You will remember he had precious little chance given him yesterday for pouring linked

sweetness long drawn out into her shell-like ear at the celebration," he sneered, with an angry, vicious curl of his lips.

Insane jealousy caused him to drop the mask a little too far, and Queen Nadine shook a tight-clinched hand before his face, as she hissed, rather than exclaimed:

"If harm has befallen him, your hand is at the bottom of it! If harm has come to him, beware. I will avenge him myself!"

"One would be tempted to think you were talking of your lover, instead of to him, Nadine," with a short, ugly laugh.

She turned away again, to utter a low cry as she saw the party come to a halt while yet some distance away, a single horseman riding forward, slow, and with bowed head, like one who is performing an unwelcome duty.

Another glance, to make sure that Pink Archer was not among the party, whom she had long since recognized as the cowboys who had remained behind at the mesa, then, without paying any attention to the half-effort which Nash Whildon made to intercept her, Queen Nadine sped across the azotea to the nearest steps, springing down them with reckless haste, fairly staggering Colonel Falconer as she brought up against him at their foot.

"What on earth are you trying to do, girl?" he spluttered, catching his breath as he recoiled from the shock. "What—you haven't been playing the fool, I hope, Whildon?" with fierce suspicion as he caught sight of the rancher following after.

"Hold him!" flashed Nadine, one hand clasp tightly to her heart as though she could thus control its mad throbings. "Keep him until all is known, to suffer the penalty for—"

With a desperate effort she conquered her agitation. Even Nash Whildon, used though he was to seeing her marvelous changes, could scarcely believe that this cold, statuesque figure was that which he had looked upon but a single breath before.

"Father, the men are coming back from the mesa. Something has happened. Until all is explained, I demand that you keep close to Mr. Whildon. If any crime has been committed, he must clear his skirts, or—"

"Have you a pair of handcuffs, or do you think a lasso will be sufficient?" coldly laughed the rancher, holding out his hands, the wrists close together.

"Be turned if I don't think this ranch has turned into a lunatic asylum while I've been asleep!" growled the bewildered master, glancing from one speaker to the other in dismay. "What under the sun—"

"Wait—he is coming!" sharply interposed Nadine, inclining her head toward the outer gateway. "We will soon learn all. And you!" with a quivering finger directed at Nash Whildon, "will remain silent until the news is spoken. Then—if necessary, I will kill you with my own hand!"

Nash Whildon bowed, his face cold and hard, his eyes glowing like balls of fire. Though he knew that his life was in danger, all the greater because Queen Nadine had so thoroughly recovered her powers, he showed no signs of fear. If worst came to worst, he could defend himself.

"Hallo! the house!" came the clear tones of Royal Hart from close without the walls.

"Enter!" cried Nadine, her voice clear and distinct, her face pale as a corpse, but seeming cold and hard as ice itself.

There came the jingling of spurs as the yellow-haired sport leaped from the saddle, and a moment later he strode through the passage, stopping short with a slight exclamation as he saw Queen Nadine. Although his face was very grave before, it seemed still more so now. And until his eyes rested on the colonel, he seemed about to beat a retreat.

"The boss!" he uttered, with a gasp as of relief. "If you don't mind, sir, I would like to have a word or two with you in—"

"Why not now and here?" coldly interposed Nadine.

"Well, ma'am, you see—"

"Out with it, man!" growled the still confused rancher. "If you're going to serve on this ranch, you might as well begin by understanding that everybody, from head to tail, is under petticoat rule here!"

"You bring bad tidings, not?" still with that strange calmness in voice as in face. "Speak out. What has happened? Who is hurt? What is the meaning of that strangely shrouded figure which you left behind with the men while you advanced alone?"

While Queen Nadine was speaking, Royal Hart kept his eyes roving swiftly from face to face. Was it only his own guilty conscience that made Nash Whildon think the yellow-haired sport from Mexico looked longest, keenest upon his features?

"Well, ma'am, if you insist, I obey. You know we stopped behind at the mesa last night. All was quiet when I went to sleep, but a cowardly cur stole into camp to use his knife on Mr. Archer, who—"

"He was killed? You dare bring such tidings to me!" flashed Nadine, whipping forth a revolver and leveling it at the speaker.

"Was I to blame, ma'am?" with no perceptible flinching, his gaze fairly meeting her flashing orbs. "It was all over before I got fairly awake, and there was nothing to do but kill the cur—a assassin, or—"

"Who was he? Where is he? If you dared to kill him before I can wring the whole foul plot from his lips, it will prove the blackest hour of all your life!" fiercely cried the amazon, half-wild with rage and vengeance.

As her heat increased, Royal Hart seemed to grow cooler and more composed. He even smiled as he gazed into the grim muzzle that shook until it could scarcely keep him covered.

"I never killed him, ma'am, though the temptation mighty nigh got away with me before I happened to think that it might serve a good turn if I could frighten him into telling just who it was that hired him to kill Pink Archer."

Again he broke off, as Queen Nadine gave a painful gasp, her rigidly-erect figure shivering as though about to fall. His handsome face was full of solicitude for the lady, but his eyes were for the most part turned toward Nash Whildon. And cold, unmoved though that individual seemed, he was alert enough to see that the yellow-haired sport kept a hand resting against a pistol-butt. Habit? Possibly. But it looked more as though he anticipated an emergency that would call for its rapid manipulation.

"And that hadn't ought to be hard," coldly interposed the owner of Open Hand Ranch. "Of course a poor devil, caught in the act, would confess anything—even to lying—in hopes of saving his life!"

"I hope you are right, Mr. Whildon," slowly uttered Hart.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" flashed the rancher, hotly.

"Precisely what I say," was the deliberate retort. "We tried it on—Red Clam and I. We gave the rascal a chance for his life if he would only tell the whole truth. It wasn't so easy to get him good and scared. He turned out to be a tougher nut than I ever tried to crack! But we meant cold business, and he soon began to weaken. He said that he was hired to put Pink Archer out of the way. That he cut the stirrup-leather yesterday. That he tried to break his neck with his lasso. And failing in both, he stole back to make sure with his knife!"

"His name! Speak his name!" harshly cried Queen Nadine.

"Osorio the Roper, he said he was called. And he swore that he was hired to kill Pink Archer by his master!" swiftly added Royal Hart.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

WITH a grating curse, Nash Whildon jerked forth a revolver, covering the messenger as he savagely cried out:

"Eat your words. Take them back, or I'll riddle you like a sieve!"

There was death in his glowing eyes, death in his white, strained face, and there would have been death at his finger-tip had Royal Hart made even the slightest motion toward drawing a pistol to defend himself.

But the yellow-haired sport seemed taken wholly by surprise, and his general air was that of a man who begins to believe he has fallen unconsciously among lunatics.

With wide open eyes, filled with a curious mingling of wonder and disgust, he stared at the master of Open Hand Ranch, not even lifting a hand to guard himself or to attack the other.

"What's the matter with my words? What have you got to do with it, anyway?" he coldly demanded, a tincture of scorn mixing with the other sentiments so plainly expressed by his handsome face.

"Down with your gun, Nash Whildon!" sharply cried Queen Nadine, recovering in a measure from the shock which the tidings brought by Royal Hart had given her. "Down, I say!"

She sprung between the two men, fairly thrusting the muzzle of her weapon into the pale face of the rancher, her left hand closing over the mouth of his revolver at the same time.

"Your will is law, of course, but—"

"Obey the law, then!" was the sharp interruption. "Put up your gun and listen in silence, unless you want us to condemn you off-hand!"

"Do it for all of me, Whildon," half-laughed Royal Hart. "I never pull on a fellow-being unless I know what I'm doing it for, and I've got to do a little prospecting before I save why you flare out like this. Yours to command, colonel!"

The last sentence came in prompt, business-like tones, drawn forth by the action of Falconer, who seemed utterly taken aback by all these rapid shiftings. With a vigorous shake of his head as though he hoped thus to clear his confused wits, he strode forward and caught the messenger by the arm, giving him a shake as he growled:

"What is all this racket about, anyway? Who's hurt? Who did it?"

"That's just what I was coming to when the post slipped over," with a touch of injured feeling, musingly his words, as he cast a side glance toward Nash Whildon. "One would almost be tempted to think I was accusing him of attempting the death of Pink Archer!"

"What else were you doing?" grated the rancher, his blue eyes still ablaze, though his pistol-hand had sunk back to his side under the fierce command of Queen Nadine.

"Simply telling the company what that snaky Greaser said before he killed himself."

Nadine gave a harsh cry of angry surprise. The colonel stepped back, his face a ludicrous study of perplexity. Nash Whildon—was it relief that sent such a change over his face and manner?

"If I mistook your meaning, sir, I stand ready to apologize," he said, his tones cold and even. "I really understood you to accuse me of having a finger in the pie."

"I was simply telling what the fellow said before he killed himself, not because I took it for truth."

"He is dead—this Osorio?" demanded Queen Nadine, struggling hard to regain her wonted composure.

"Too dead to skin—begging your pardon, ma'am, for letting the expression slip," bowed Royal Hart, with a pretty assumption of confusion on his handsome face. The fact is—

"Killed himself!" echoed Nadine, passing a trembling hand across her white, lined face.

"Why kill himself?"

"Well, if the critter is to be believed, he did it to save his master getting into trouble on his account."

"And that master—he swore it was me?" coldly demanded Whildon.

Royal Hart stared at the rancher, his brows arching in utter astonishment, as though such an idea had never occurred to him. And his reply came prompt, decisive:

"Just the contrary, Mr. Whildon. He stuck to it that you knew nothing whatever about the matter. He said that you were not his master, though you thought you was. He declared that he had been placed on your ranch to further the ends of his real master; but further than that he wouldn't go. And when we tried to coax the fellow, he managed to snatch a revolver from my belt and drilled a hole clean through his cabeza before one of us could lift a finger to stop his hand!"

While Royal Hart was thus laboriously striving to bring order out of the confusion into which purposely or not, his tongue had tangled the truth, Queen Nadine was fighting to recover her shaken nerve. And as he concluded, she turned toward Nash Whildon, her voice cold and menacing as she uttered:

"He was your slave, this Osorio. He had no other master than you. To you, then, will we look for reparation for the foul murder of Pink Archer!"

"But look here!" spluttered the yellow-haired sport, the picture of comical dismay. "Be blessed if I know just who I am or how it all got so pesky tangled up! I wouldn't take oath that I'm not pointing at China with my head—not trying to walk the milky way with my feet, even! But this much I do know: Pink Archer is just the liveliest dead man you ever saw in the whole course of your personal experience!"

Queen Nadine sprang to his side, turning him around so that the full rays of the sun fell upon his face, gazing eagerly, breathlessly into his puzzled eyes. Twice she essayed to speak, then managed to gasp:

"It is so? You are not lying? He is alive? Not—not dead?"

"Not unless he's dead of old age within the last hour, ma'am," was the solemn response. "I left him riding along just as strong and chipper and healthy as he ever was in all his life, only—"

Nash Whildon turned fairly livid with savage rage and chagrin, his right hand gripping a weapon, his voice barely articulate as he grated:

"What sort of trick are you playing now? You swore Archer was murdered by a Greaser, and—"

"Dollars to cents you can't begin to prove it!" cut in the yellow-haired sport, both tones and manner that of a man whose temper is at last beginning to give way. "I said that a rascally varlet crept into our camp to murder Pink Archer. I said I didn't wake up until it was all over; nor did I. When my eyes were fairly open, Red Clam had the Roper foul, and all Archer and I had to do was to look on while pard trussed the critter up for the inquisition."

"That's what I said, or what I begun saying. If you hadn't chipped in before your proper cue, I wouldn't have to waste good air saying it all over again."

Nash Whildon seemed on the point of speaking again, but checked himself, turning abruptly away, an uneasy light leaping into his eyes. Though he could not prove his suspicions, he felt almost positive that a cunning trap had been laid for him. And, worse luck! he knew that he had fairly blundered into it!

The colonel seemed worse taken aback than either of the others, his whisky-bemused senses refusing to unriddle the enigma. He knew that

in some fashion, this fellow had terribly excited both Nadine and his prospective son-in-law, and avoided at him portentously as he said:

"You want to look a little out, my pretty hull! Fun is fun, but this is Business. Cards, and practical jokes are 'way below par! What're you trying to get through you, anyhow?"

"Come according to orders, sir," stiffly replied Hart, saluting. "Got a stiff out yonder, and don't know what to do with it."

"Got a—you mean that you've brought a corpse here?"

"Just that, sir. If you don't want anything of it, I'll tell the boys to drop it in some convenient corner where it'll be out of the way. Or," turning stiffly toward the master of Open Hand Ranch, "if you would like to have the disposal of it, Mr. Whildon, I don't reckon any of the outfit would seriously object."

Nash Whildon flashed an ugly look at the speaker, and retorted:

"Dispose of your own dead. I have nothing to do with it."

"But—if it is really the Roper?" hesitated Falconer, an uneasy light in his bloodshot eyes.

"That is easily decided, sir," added Royal Hart, saluting again, then turning on his heel and striding swiftly back through the vaulted passage.

Without seeming to hear the voice of the colonel who called after him, the yellow-haired sport leaped into the saddle and dashed away from the buildings, heading for the little company still waiting on the plain beyond. With an addition to their ranks, however, since Pink Archer, looking very unlike a corpse, spurred swiftly out of a long, low depression in the ground, which had served to cover his approach until he voluntarily broke cover.

"The boss wants to have a look at the Greaser, boys!" cried Royal Hart, with a wave of his hand toward the house. "Take him along. I've broken the news, so I don't reckon there'll be any collapse when you come to take the blanket off!"

The cowboys set forward, Archer and Hart coming together and following after at a slower pace. And the yellow-haired sport muttered:

"He's the man we want, pard! He tried a bluff, but it was entirely too diaphanous. There was guilt enough in his face and eyes to hang a dozen better men than he ever dared be!"

"You let him see you thought so?"

"If he didn't, terror and guilt made him blinder than a bat! And yet, the best of it all is that he can't find a handle to pick a row with!" laughed Hart, in subdued but hearty glee. "I roughed him with one hand, while smoothing him down with the other, until he's actually afraid to take a single step lest he fall and break his own neck! It was just fun alive, I tell you!"

"I only wonder he didn't try to slip in a shot!"

"All it lacked was touching the trigger, and for about ten seconds I looked for that to follow. It was nip and tuck, and tuck got there! So much the worse for Mr. Whildon! He'll never come so near clearing the field, again while his head's warm!"

"But he cooled down? How am I to meet the fellow?"

"Just as though you never for a moment suspected him of having a finger in the little pie Osorio the Roper tried to slip out of the pantry. The noose is about his neck, and I want him to draw it snug with his own hands!" earnestly added Royal Hart, as they drew near the building, in the passageway of which now stood the trio.

Royal Hart deftly removed the blanket with which, for a purpose, he had shrouded the corpse of the Mexican. Just long enough for all present to recognize Osorio the Roper, then a wave of his hand bade the men take their ghastly companion away.

This sight seemed to sober the colonel, and drawing the two men a little aside, he listened gravely to their recital. No need to repeat their account in this connection, since the tragedy has already been described in detail. There was but one addition; and both men declared that they put no faith in the imaginary confession implicating the master of the dead man.

After this, the colonel reluctantly accepted the resignation of his foreman. Pink Archer was firm in his resolution. He had ignominiously failed before his men, and could not conscientiously retain his situation. And he left a better man behind him, in Royal Hart.

Meantime, Nat Whildon was doing his best to smooth matters over with Queen Nadine, succeeding beyond her expectations, to all outward seeming. Each one played well the part they had chosen, and each one in a fair measure imposed upon the other.

But on one point Nadine took a firm stand.

"If anything happens to Pink Archer before our wedding, I will take back my vow, and never be your bride," she declared, firmly.

"Nadine! one would almost believe you still loved that fellow!"

"It is not love, but hate! I have taken a sacred oath to punish him with my own hand!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

PINK ARCHER AND HIS ANGEL.

POSITIVELY as Pink Archer declined to reconsider his resignation, it was long past noon

before he finally succeeded in getting away from Falcon Ranch. Then he managed to escape an interview with Queen Nadine, though in the peristyle which Nash Whildon showed in remaining, there were many hands to shake, many a parting word to be exchanged, before that who had served under him so long, would permit him to depart.

But when once free, he made up for lost time, sending his good horse along at a pace that betokened his eagerness to reach his destination.

It is hardly necessary to name that, for enough has been said to give a fair idea of the situation.

For nearly a year, Pink Archer had been deeply in love with pretty Nellie Angell, and though he had never actually told his love, he was keen enough to see that his company was not at all disagreeable to the young lady.

Possibly the young fellow was just a little too conscientious for his own good. As before hinted, he had never given Queen Nadine the slightest actual encouragement; had given her no right to believe her mad passion was or ever would be reciprocated. Yet he knew that she loved him, and he felt that he could not avow his affection for another as long as he remained a servant on the Falcon Ranch.

He could not bring Nellie there to live with him as his wife, under the circumstances, and he could not bring himself to desert the ranch without some plausible excuse.

This will account in a great measure for his peculiar actions at the celebration contrived by Colonel Falconer. If defeated even by Little Earthquake, he would have an excuse for resigning his situation.

Now, with a feeling of freedom such as he had not known for a year past, he was riding at full speed for the humble cabin where Angel Nellie lived, bent on putting his faith to the touch.

"If she refuses—but she will not!" with a smile that rendered his strong face really handsome. "I saw it in her eyes last night! I read it in her warm little hand! I will succeed—she will consent to be mine, and then—"

It was the usual lover's rhapsody, and the remainder may easily be left to the reader's imagination.

Sam Angell was what was called "a roster." He had only a few hundred head of cattle, with a range of only a few thousand acres to which he could lay claim; not by right of purchase, but of location.

It was before the days of mighty stock companies, of fence-cutting and free grass controversies. And Angel Sam was permitted to plod on in his own sluggish way, from hand to mouth, without any attempt being made to either freeze or fence him out.

His location was a pretty one, viewed with an artistic eye, though the greater portion of his "range" was of too broken a nature to be coveted by any really ambitious cattleman. The little cabin was situated near the base of a rocky hill, in a tiny alcove made by nature. It was constructed of stones, laid up with mud for lime, and the nimble hands of Angell Nell had trained vines and creepers on either side of the door, and around the windows, and up over the heavily shingled roof, until the ugly cabin was fairly transformed into a bower of beauty.

Pink Archer was not sorry to find Nellie alone. Though he really liked Angel Sam—what lover ever disliked the parent of his divinity before marriage?—and had little doubt as to his giving full and free consent to his suit, it was Nellie he came to see, after all.

And Nellie? Well, if she had not been looking for and expecting company of some sort, then she was a marvel of neatness, of smartness without the faintest shade of vulgarity in dress or ornament.

And then, and then—

It was the old, old story over again. The story that was first breathed in Eden, which has lived ever since, which will end only when chaos comes.

Bold, brave fellow though he undeniably was, Pink Archer found it a terribly formidable task to break the ice, even with the encouragement which blushing, shy, happy Nellie so unconsciously gave him. But it was accomplished at last, and after the first dash, it all became so easy—so easy and so sweet!

Never mind those first few minutes. We all know more or less of what they consisted, and while delicious enough in actual experience, they cannot be called the same when "warmed over," no matter how skillful the chef.

By the time it was pretty well understood by both that their future bliss was fully insured, that little cabin seemed all too small to contain them. Even all out-doors seemed hardly large enough to encompass their bliss, without crowding!

They walked, arm in arm, of course, as far as the spring which gushed so merrily out from under a great, moss-covered rock, spreading into a miniature lake below, then losing itself in the grass, as it stole on down the valley. A shady tree overhung the spring, and there was a neat rustic seat at its base, where the lovers shortly after came to a pause.

And after a time Pink Archer began telling how he had severed his connection with Falcon

Ranch, and Nellie, with a charming pout, wanted to know how he expected to live without seeing Queen Nadine. And her pout changed to a quiver as Pink failed to laugh, or even smile.

As already hinted, Archer was really too conscientious for his own peace of mind. He was quite wise enough to know that one woman never likes to hear of another's loving the man she loves truly, even while she is perfectly assured that her reign is paramount. But he felt in duty bound to tell his betrothed everything, without reserve. He could not begin their new life with even the ghost of a secret between them.

Honorable and praiseworthy, of course, but terribly risky at times!

And so, drawing the sunny little head tenderly to his heart, with his cheek resting against the silken tresses, Archer began to tell of the mad passion which Queen Nadine had betrayed so fully only the day before.

It was a difficult story to tell, without blaming one too much while clearing the other of guilt or fault, and so he found it as he proceeded. Still, it would have been yet more difficult for one who had been less blameless than himself. He had nothing to conceal on his own part, and so was not forced to weigh his words before speaking.

"I really believe she was crazy, little birdy," he murmured, in conclusion. "You have seen enough of her to form some idea of her strange, wild, reckless nature, and can understand what I mean by that. Not a lunatic, exactly, but more like one whose brain is temporarily unsettled by strong drink."

"And hers was yesterday—I counted the glasses she emptied, until I grew tired!" a little maliciously murmured Nellie.

"That helped, of course. But I believe she was sorry before we parted, last night. She spoke so kindly of you, and—"

"Did you tell her that—"

"She guessed it, little one," as his arm closed about her shrinking figure. "She saw it in my eyes, I reckon: you women are so terribly keen! And though I told her I had never told you I loved you; though I said I hardly dared hope for a favorable answer; she bade me tell you nothing would please her more than to give my bride away; she even said she would give you a dowry—"

"I'll never take it from her hands!" flashed Nell, slipping from his embrace, her face brightly flushed, her blue eyes all aglow.

"Of course not, birdy," laughed Pink, as he deftly drew her back to his side. "All the gold in the world wouldn't add one charm to my Angel Nellie!"

For a few minutes after this, there is really nothing to record which would interest the reader. It was a tiny little quarrel, but it required almost as much making up as though it had been a pitched battle, fought out to the death!

Pink Archer, having performed what he deemed a sacred duty, both to himself and to the little woman who was so soon to become his wife, was by no means loth to turn the subject. And side by side on the little rustic bench they sat, talking over the golden future in low, happy tones, lost to all else.

They would unite in coaxing her father—his father, from that day on!—to sell out his little property, and seek some other location, far away from Falcon Ranch. On this Nellie persisted, with a stubbornness which Pink had never known her to possess.

And so busy planning a happy future were they, that neither noted the swift passage of time. Neither heard the steps of Angel Sam as the old man came down the valley and entered the house, without catching sight of the lovers sitting in the shade beside the spring.

Neither of them saw Angel Sam step back to the door, glancing around with a troubled light in his keen old eyes, with a shadow of sudden terror darkening his wrinkled, weather-beaten face. Nor the sudden change which came over it as he caught sight of them so close together: a change that was not altogether of joy or relief at finding his first, worst fears without foundation in fact.

CHAPTER XXX.

ANGEL SAM RAKES UP THE PAST.

DULLER eyes than his could have read the truth conveyed by that close companionship, but there was more of regret than of pleasure in Angel Sam's rugged features as he left the cabin and strode down the path that led to the spring.

The lovers heard the sound as his heavy boots ground on a bit of gravel, and as their faces turned in that direction, Nellie uttered a low cry and would have sprung away from that guardian arm, had not Pink Archer held her the more firmly.

"I reckon I'd leave her slide, lad, ef I was you," dryly uttered Angel Sam. "Sun's mighty nigh out o' sight, an' the fire ain't even started fer supper!"

"It is all my fault, Daddy Sam, but I'll get square by helping—"

"I don't reckon the gal really needs any help,

Pink. And then—come to think on't, they's a bit o' somethin' I've bin wantin' to tell ye, ever sence—sence 'way back yender!"

The lovers were on their feet now, Nellie blushing and turning pale by turns, her blue eyes downcast, a fit of nervous trembling shaking her slender figure as she faintly struggled to get free. Pink Archer a little paler than he had been a few moments before, but smiling bravely into that hard, enigmatical countenance.

"It's as you say, of course. I don't want to cross you, to-day of all days. But give the little girl one kind word to live on while we talk it over, won't you?"

It was a half-jesting speech, but Angel Sam took it for pure earnest, judging from his actions. He stooped and touched his thin lips to Nellie's brow, and his voice was almost musical as he muttered:

"Trot along, birdy! An' pray that they won't no great harm come o' this day's work!"

There was an earnestness in his tones that impressed Pink Archer disagreeably. His forced gayety vanished, and he silently released his betrothed, permitting her to take speedy flight to the cabin.

He watched her light, lithe figure until she vanished inside the cabin, then turned to Angel Sam, who was eying him steadily, keenly, almost suspiciously as it seemed to the young man.

"I've asked Nellie to marry me, Mr. Angel," he said, with a degree of formality that brought the ghost of a smile to the thin lips of Angel Sam. "If I had seen you first, I might have asked your permission first. As it was impossible to do that, I ask it now."

"An' ef I say you can't hev it? Ef I say I'll never give my 'greement to anythin' o' the sort, you'll go your own way an' leave us to go ourn, o' course?" with a curious grimace that was only half frown.

"I won't say that. I couldn't carry it out, even if I were to try. And I don't think—I'm mighty sure I couldn't even try!"

The flushing lover began moderately enough, but the last words burst from his lips with a force and frankness that denied all control.

A short, hard laugh came from the veteran, but it was quickly checked.

"Yit it hedn't ort to be so mighty hard doin', lad. Nell is a good gal, but look at the stock she comes from! Look at her pap! Angel Sam the critters call me, but I reckon they'd hev come heap nigher the bull's-eye o' truth ef they'd looked in t'other d'rection fer a han'le to hitch afore the Sam part."

"You are Nellie's father, and that makes everything right," was the simple response.

Angel Sam gazed keenly into Archer's face at this, but those frank brown eyes stood the ordeal without wavering. That honest face had nothing to conceal, and the veteran gave a low sigh as he turned away.

Archer watched him curiously for a brief space, then gently touched his arm. Before his lips could shape the words he thought of uttering, Angel Sam nodded briskly, dropping down upon the rustic bench.

"Set down, Pink. It's got to come some time, an' I reckon right now is good as any other. I said I wanted to tell you somethin' this heap long time. I tried it more'n once, when I hed a idee that things was sorter workin' 'round this way; but as often I didn't—wuss luck."

"I will listen, of course," and the lover dropped upon the seat beside the veteran, "but if it is anything about Nell, I tell you frankly that it can't make a bit of difference in our relations. We love each other. She has promised to be my wife before long. Unless death steps between, I will claim and she keep that pledge."

"It's a growin' fear o' death or some dirty trickery that makes me do my talkin' right now, lad," slowly added Angel Sam. "Ef it was any less then that, could I say this? Could I deny the little gal I've nussed an' brung up es my own child?"

"I—don't—understand!" stammered Archer, his eyes filled with puzzled surprise. "Surely—Nellie is your child?"

Angel Sam tried to force a laugh, but it proved a pitiful failure. His rugged features were strangely contorted, but he managed to reply:

"In love, ef no nearer in law. She never so much as suspicioned this, lad, an' I do reckon it'll break her all up fer a time when she finds it out, but—"

"Then why let her know?" quickly interjected Archer. "You have kept the secret so long, why not keep it forever?"

"That's jest what I want you to help me settle on," nodded Angel Sam, with a furtive glance toward the cabin, and lowering his voice as though he feared the gentle breeze of evening might carry an alarming syllable to the ears of the girl whom he loved so dearly, even though no drop of his blood flowed through her veins. "That's jest the biggest sheer o' the trouble I've hed in mind these months past—ever sence I noticed you was comin' to look sweet to'rds Nellie."

Angel Sam hesitated before he ended his sentence, and Archer had a curious sense that these words were not the ones he first intended utter-

ing. There was a secret within a secret, and he must know it all.

"Tell me all—hide nothing, and I'll do my level best in trying to set you right, Sam," he said gravely. "Who is Nellie?"

"That was what I couldn't lever wring out o' the man that brung her to us—my ole woman was livin' then, ye know," hurriedly responded Angel.

"But you knew him, of course?"

"Why not, sence he'd bin a side pard o' mine fer many a long year afore that?" speaking with greater ease, settling back in his seat as though resolved to take his comfort while raking up the past. "French Poley the boys knowed him best by, an' I wouldn't like to make affydvay that even I ever heard his other name. But that don't count."

"Poley was a rovin' critter, an' never settled down like I did when I jumped the broomstick with my ole woman, but ef we wasn't nigh so often together, Poley never missed a good chance fer to drap in on his ole pard fer a day or two, when he hit my part o' the kentry. An' one day he come ag'in. An' he hed a mighty curious pack with him fer a man o' his sort—monstrous curious, I mought say!"

"Nellie, you mean?" with a dark frown. "Surely she cannot have been a child of any such man!"

"Poley swore she was, fu'st off, but I knowed he was lyin'. Not that I told him so, then, mind ye!" with a faint laugh. "I was a pritty tough nut to crack my own self, but Poley was heap sight wuss, an' I don't reckon I'd be here now ef I hed tried it on then! Still, I made up my mind I'd find out the hull truth, an' that night I played dirt onto my ole pard: I slipped my liker, an' kept it up ontel I hed him ful'er'n a goose-har tick! An' then I pumped him as nigh dry as I could."

"He said they was a man come to him an' paid him big money fer to nab a kid an' shet off its wind. That was a bit out o' his run o' business, mind ye, but jest then he was shoal on the bar, an' wanted the dingbats wust kind!"

"Waal, they come to a barg'in, an' Poley 'lowed he meant to kerry it out to the queen's taste. He hed to wait while the man that hired him to do the job got out o' the way, so's to prove a halibi, like, ef the row was kicked up too close to his neighborhood. An' then—waa! Poley found he couldn't kill the kid, no how! Said she laughed up in his face, an' called him daddy, an' hugged him with her little fat arms! But es he'd tuck the money, an' spent a part o' it, he done the next best; he toted the kid off an' fin'ly fetched her to us."

"He couldn't 'a' come at a better time fer the little critter. My ole woman hed jest lost her kid, an' she tuck a notion that this'ne was the 'identical pictur' o' the baby her eyes was still wet fer. An' so—waa! I don't reckon Poley could 'a' got away with that baby es long es the ole woman hed a finger to scratch with!"

"Lucky all 'round that he didn't want to. It was to git shet o' her that fetched him to our cabin, fer though he said it went too durn hard ag'in' the grain fer to shet off her wind, es he'd promised to do, yit he wasn't a fambly man even so fur; he couldn't keep the kid. An' so he give her over to us, agreein' that he'd never try to claim it back, or ever let out a hint that it wasn't actilly our own kid."

"You tried to find out who her parents really were, of course?"

Angel Sam shook his head, almost doggedly. "No I didn't, nuther! Fer why? My ole woman just froze to Nellie, an' it'd bin wuss then robbin' a she painter fer to even try to take a step that way. An' then—waa! I love her now, but I cannot love her no better then I did in them days!"

Pink Archer gave a long breath of relief. From the first words uttered by Angel Sam, he had feared a revelation that might, despite the bond of true love that existed between, sever him from Nellie. She need never know that Sam was not her father in fact as he had been in love. She had never known her real parents, and even were they still living, they would be strangers to her—she could never learn to regard and love them as her own kindred, even were she to be restored to them.

"We'll make it up to her, Daddy Sam," he muttered, a smile playing about his lips, a love-light in his eyes. "She'll never learn different; never dream but that you are really her father."

"Ef I only knowed that fer sart'in!" then hurriedly adding: "You know when I tuck that trip down to Santone?"

Archer nodded. Right well did he remember when Angel Sam went to San Antonio, for the veteran, leaving Nellie alone, begged him to keep an eye in her direction, to see that no harm came to her. And it was during those guardian days that Pink Archer learned to love Angel Nell!

"I run acrost him down thar—Poley, you know!"

Archer gave a start, his face suddenly growing grave with a premonition of coming trouble.

"What did he have to say? Surely he didn't bring up the past?"

"That's jest what he did!" nodded Angel Sam, with lowered voice and an uneasy glance around them as though he feared the presence of an eavesdropper. "The fu'st words he said was to ax how was Nellie? The kid, he called her, though, he never knowed what name we give her."

"If you had only evaded him—or lied! If you had told him she was dead, or married and lost sight of!" frowned Archer.

"Which I tried to kick myself later beca'se I didn't, but he tuck me so by surprise thet I didn't hev time to think o' lyin'," gloomily responded Sam. "I let it all out, an' when I spoke o' the place I was livin' at, his two eyes stuck out so fur you could 'a' hung your hat onto 'em like a peg!"

"He was mighty sober fer a bit, but then he brightened up an' acted the lively pard which he alays was when sober. An' in his Frenchy way, he let out what hed hit him all o' a heap, so to speak. He said he fu'st thought as how he'd run the bawk him own self, but come to think how I'd raised the gal, it didn't seem the pure quill fer to freeze me out. An' then—he said he'd found out the name o' the man who hired him to kill the kid. He said his name was Falconer!"

"Then you think?" slowly began Archer, choking down his surprise by a desperate effort of will. "You believe that?"

"That the birdy ain't no ways too safe livin' so cluss to Falcon Ranch!" muttered Angel Sam, with another wary glance around them.

"What?" and Archer leaped to his feet, with glowing eyes. "You surely don't for an instant believe that?"

Just at that instant Nellie announced supper, and Angel Sam hurriedly muttered as he gripped Pink by the arm:

"Not a word or a hint afore birdy, lads! Keep a still tongue in your head ontel I kin say jest what it is I'm skeered of!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE WEASEL REPORTS.

THAT cunning blundering on the part of Royal Hart, bade fair to bring trouble where all had seemed so smooth and pleasant. Queen Nadine had so plainly betrayed her real sentiments—had so clearly shown her unabated interest in Pink Archer—that Nash Whildon began to see how nearly he had been hoodwinked by an artful woman's wiles.

And then, as well, he was uncomfortably conscious of having acted in a decidedly compromising fashion when so adroitly led to believe Osorio, the Roper, had succeeded in his bloody mission.

Taking everything into consideration, there was a rather awkward state of affairs between the recently betrothed couple.

Of the twain, Nadine proved to be much the better actor; possibly because she felt not a whit of the love which boiled so fiercely in the veins of her soon-to-be husband.

When the mistake was smoothed over, and the actual truth made clear to all, Queen Nadine rapidly recovered her clear wits and steady nerve. She knew that she was playing against a thoroughly desperate gamester, and that lent her added nerve, if any was needed.

She declared that though she had once loved Pink Archer—even going so far as to frankly admit that she had offered her love, only to have it spurned with contempt.

"Only for that you would not be here or alive," she coldly added, without a trace of emotion in face or tones. "I would have killed you at once when you made those threats."

"And so brought ruin on your own head!" sneered the master of Open Hand Ranch. "You forget the papers I spoke of."

"I would have dared your friend and his proofs, be they what they may. I would have sought him and them to the bitter end. But since it was not so to be, well, I yielded."

There was no word from Whildon. Just then he felt little in the mood for paying compliments. With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Queen Nadine resumed:

"Why? Hardly through love for the man who so viciously threatened me, to be sure. Because I swore I would drink deep of revenge on the one who sneered at my love. Because I swore to live and rule until Pink Archer had suffered at least a portion of the agony he had caused me."

"That is why I turned upon you when I believed your Roper had robbed me of my rights. That is why I told you, what I repeat once more, that if aught of harm comes to Pink Archer until after our wedding night passes, I will never be your bride, because—well, because you will be wedded to death instead!"

Ugly words for an ardent lover to listen to, but Nash Whildon had to "grin and bear it" as best he might. Until she was fairly bound to him, Queen Nadine would rule. After that!

Yet Nash Whildon rode away from Falcon Ranch in a far better humor than may be thought. Nadine, having covered her slip as best she could, bent her powers toward placating the rancher, and with even more success than she had dared hope for.

It was nearly sunset when Nash Whildon rode

briskly away, bound for his own ranch. Colonel Falconer secretly watched him depart, then sought Nadine, only to be repulsed. She was not in the mood for talking. Never mind—he must wait!

And, just as he had done so many times before of recent days, Hugh Falconer sulkily beat a retreat, locking himself in with his brandy.

After his departure, Nadine seemed strangely restless, pacing the floor, gazing with a frown through the narrow, iron-grated window which gave a view of the far-away hills where Angel Sam was located.

"Will he fail me, also?" she grated, her strong white teeth clicking viciously together as, for the hundredth time, she sought the window. "If he has—if he does! Ha!" with a hissing breath of eagerness as she caught sight of an approaching figure on horseback. "It is he! I will soon know! And then—"

The sentence was left unfinished in words, but her white fingers plucked the jeweled dagger from her corsage, and the steel flashed in the dim lamplight as she swept through the air.

A few moments later a cat-like footfall was heard without the room, and opening the door, Queen Nadine admitted the spy for whom she had waited so long and so impatiently.

The Weasel, he was called, quite as much from his ferret-like face and marvelously supple body as from his naturally prying, inquisitive disposition.

A Mexican by birth, he had come to Falcon Ranch soon after the place changed hands, and though he was almost repulsively ugly in face, Queen Nadine at once took him under her protection.

"Well?" sharply demanded Nadine, from the couch upon which she had sunk at his coming. "You have not failed?"

She spoke in her mother's tongue, and the Weasel answered in the same language, his tones soft and musical, in startling contrast to his repulsive appearance.

"Can I fail, when my mistress bids me succeed?"

"You were so long gone that I began to fear a failure."

"There was so much to see, so much to hear!" smiled the Weasel, with a curious writhing of his slender figure. "My horse is wet with sweat as though he had just swum the river, and—"

"You followed the senor there? You saw him at that house?"

The Weasel bowed assent, and then went on to describe how he had managed to steal near enough to the little cabin to overhear the words spoken by Pink Archer, as well as the response made by Angel Nell.

He stood with head bowed, with hands meekly crossed before his bosom, but his ferret-like eyes were furtively watching the changing countenance of his mistress as she listened. With marvelous fidelity he repeated whole sentences, even giving them the very tones in which they had been originally uttered. And all the while, with vicious joy he was reveling in the bitter torture his mistress was enduring.

Not that he hated her, or had cause for bating her. He loved Queen Nadine as much as it was in his nature to love anybody besides himself. He was so thoroughly depraved that he found pleasure only in torturing others. Whether his friend or his enemies was an after consideration.

"Queen Nadine never once interrupted him during the earlier part of his report. It was not that she feared to expose her feelings to her spy, for she cared nothing for that; she felt that any attempt to speak would choke her, so intense was her rage as she listened."

The Weasel told how he had stolen after the lovers when they went out to the rustic seat. Bit by bit he repeated what he had heard and saw, omitting nothing in his secret amusement. And he told how Angel Sam came to the scene: how Nellie fled to the house, and of the conversation which ensued between the two men.

Queen Nadine sprang to a sitting posture as he proceeded, her face ghastly white, her great eyes glowing as though filled with fire, her hands clinched so tightly that the nails drew blood.

Still with the same marvelous fidelity the Weasel continued his account, even at times reproducing the rough dialect used by Angel Sam in speaking of the child so strangely placed in his care. He told of the meeting in San Antonio, and even recalled the name of the other: of Angel Sam's old partner, French Poley.

"He said—this man of the hills—that his old friend told him the name of the man who paid him money for killing the child. He said the name was Falconer, my lady!" added the Weasel.

He sprang nimbly back as Queen Nadine leaped to her feet, fairly transfigured with rage and fear. He glanced swiftly toward the door, as though bent on flight, but it was not necessary.

Nadine was recalled to herself by his movements, and with a forced laugh she resumed her seat saying:

"Bah! what matter? These cursed Gringos are such monstrous liars that they would even talk of the Virgin Mary in a clumsy jest!"

The ferret-like eyes glittered vividly, but the voice of the Weasel was soft and smooth as ever when he spoke again:

"Then it was a jest that seemed to sound like truth to Senor Pink Archer, mistress!"

"How know you that, little one?"

"Because of his face, lady. But still more because of his actions. Before I came back to tell you what I heard and saw, the senor was in his saddle and riding hard on the trail leading to San Antonio."

There was a brief silence. Queen Nadine drooped her long lashes until her blazing orbs were hidden. But she could not still the quick heaving of her bosom, nor entirely quell the sudden trembling which shook her hands as they tightly clasped each other in her lap.

The Weasel stood motionless saying nothing. He knew that his report was causing torture, but he never asked himself the reason. The result was all that he cared for.

Then, with an affected petulance, Queen Nadine said:

"It is well, and you may go, little one. Only I wish I could have known the senor was going to town. He could have brought me something. Now I must wait!"

She motioned the Weasel to depart, and he obeyed, leaving her alone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HUGH FALCONER GROWS UNEASY.

"Do they know? Do they even suspect the whole truth?"

Queen Nadine asked herself these questions, as she paced swiftly the length of the room after the Weasel left at her bidding. The mask was dropped, and she looked anything but beautiful then. She seemed to have grown years older, all in an instant. Her face looked thin and baggy. Her eyes, still glowing like balls of living fire, seemed to have retreated in their sockets. Her figure was no longer proudly erect, but bent forward, almost crouching, as she passed to and fro.

"They must know, else why has he taken the trail to San Antonio, at the beginning of a night? Why in such haste to find this villain—this Poley of the French? Why has he gone—the man of all men in my poor heart? Ah! if it were any other! Any other save him! How I would fight—how I would laugh them to scorn when—"

Her proud figure drew erect once more, and with her eyes flashing, with a vivid color flaming into her cheeks, Queen Nadine seemed herself again. In her right hand quivered and glittered the jeweled dagger with which she had saved the life of the man who she now felt was doing his best to bring disaster, if not worse, upon her and hers.

"Only for you, he would be dead! You saved his life, for what? To have him scorn your mistress! To have him turn aside from her proud love, to whisper sweet words in the ear of a silly, simpering idiot! If you had known! He would be dead, now! Lost to your mistress—true! But lost to her—to all others, as well!"

With a sudden access of passion, Queen Nadine hurled the weapon from her, laughing harshly as it struck with a ringing echo against the grating at the window, snapping in twain, the jeweled haft flying on outside, the broken blade dropping to the floor within.

Dropping down upon the couch, sitting with hands supporting her chin, and elbows on her knees, the woman stared vacantly at the bit of bright steel, as it lay reflecting the lamplight.

Her brain was busy, recalling all that the Weasel had reported, and her face accurately recorded each change of thought. Not a pleasant sight, then!

Suddenly her face grew calmer, more like the one she habitually wore. The lines and wrinkles gradually filled out until her face was full and smooth and beautiful to the outward eye. And whatever her secret emotions, when Queen Nadine unlocked her door and left the room, not even the keenest could have even suspected all she had fought out there alone with the phantoms born of sin.

She had to rap sharply at the door beyond which Colonel Hugh Falconer had locked himself before an answer was given. And her brows were angrily contracted as she crossed the threshold, confronting the unsteady, bleary-eyed rancher.

"Is it thus you clear your brain and steady your nerves? Is it after this fashion you prepare for the stout fight? Is it thus you are to defeat our enemies? Fool! Coward! Drunkard!"

With each epithet, a white clinched fist was shaken viragoishly before the purple face of the rancher. He shrunk further back, only to be followed up until he tripped and dropped heavily into a chair.

In a second, as it were, Queen Nadine altered to her usual self, a low, half-mocking laugh bubbling from her red lips as she drew a seat up to the opposite side of the table, occupying it herself.

"It is rude—unladylike—unfilial, eh?" she purred, leaning her white arms on the table.

supporting her chin upon her joined palms as she gazed across the barrier into the face of her parent. "But it is working better even than ice-water! Already you are beginning to grow sober. Already I can see the muddy wits are clearing! See that they do not grow stagnant again, else—my next lesson will last longer, and be tenfold sharper! I want you to talk, and—" "You drove me away when I came for a talk," muttered Falconer.

"Did I bid you drink yourself blind?"

"Nor have I," with an effort straightening up. "My brain is as clear as yours. My wits are as keen. Try me, if you still doubt!"

Queen Nadine nodded approvingly. Past experience told her the best and shortest method of going to work on such occasions, and the rule still proved correct. If not actually sober, Colonel Falconer was far from being drunk, and growing better with the passage of each moment.

"I sent you away because I had much to think over, much to plot and plan. And then—I was waiting for the Weasel to return with his report."

"You sent him—after Whildon?" hesitated the colonel.

Queen Nadine gave a gesture of impatience.

"After a better man than that cur ever dared be!"

The colonel frowned darkly, his hand clinching as it rested on the edge of the table before him.

"Yet that cur is the man we've got to keep smoothed down, Nadine! He's got us foul, and he means to hold his grip until he makes his point for certain! Ugh! I haven't got over shivering in my boots yet! I thought it was all up, when you flashed out like that!"

"Something else would have flashed to a purpose only for the explanation given by that blundering idiot," grated Nadine, her great eyes flashing vividly as she spoke. "If that dead body had belonged to Pink Archer, Nash Whildon would have gasped out his life on those stones—and by my hand!"

Colonel Hugh was plainly growing more and more uneasy. Used as he was to the sudden vagaries of his daughter, he could not understand the more recent developments. He knew little concerning the power of love when indulged in by a woman of her fierce nature. He could not comprehend why she should risk so much, merely because she liked one man better than another.

"But I thought that was all understood and settled yesterday? I thought you were to buy that secret by marrying Whildon, when it would be to his interest to keep the truth from leaking out!"

There was no immediate reply. Nadine sat gazing curiously, keenly into his face, like one trying to solve an important doubt. And so she was: trying to decide whether it would be prudent to trust this man with her whole intricate, perilous scheme.

"Do you know, father, that I begin to think we were playing at cross-purposes, Nash Whildon, you and I? Do you know that I think we might have made much better terms, had we only known just what secret he hinted at so guardedly?"

"He spoke of—of your uncle—"

"Yes, and declared that he knew how and why he came by his death," was the cool addition as the colonel stammered, the words he sought to utter seeming to choke him.

Falconer started from his seat, casting a wild glance around them, like one who fears an eaves-dropper. Great drops of cold perspiration stood on his temples, and his brandy-sodden face turned a sickly hue.

"Hush, girl! Are you mad?" he gasped, hoarsely, with another frightened glance around the dimly lighted room. "What if your words were to be heard? Who knows who of these infernal sneaks may be prowling around trying to pick up a crumb? And let but the ghost of a hint get out among the men, and even your beauty wouldn't be enough to save you!"

"It is not you, but the brandy that talks now, my father!" with a thinly disguised sneer. "Who would dare to play spy on you or I? Not one who has seen us twice!"

"But it's risky—you know it's mighty risky, Nadine?"

"Yet that risk must be run, my father," and her voice grew hard and cold. "We must understand just where we stand, and what obstacles we have to overcome before we can feel fairly safe. And I begin to think that we were magnifying the power of Nash Whildon. True," with a silencing wave of her hand as the colonel opened his lips to speak. "He swore that he knew all, and we took him at his word; but after what I drew from him this day, I doubt if he even suspected what you and I believe!"

Colonel Falconer smiled faintly.

"You can't go by what he says, always, Nadine. The rascal is cunning as the very Old Boy himself, and believes a tongue was given us for biding our real thoughts, instead of sticking to the simple truth."

"That may be, too, and still a cunning devil deceive himself while trying to deceive others."

So with Nash Whildon. He has found out something concerning those old raids, and with that as a foundation has built up a theory of how and why a certain man came by his death. This is bad enough, but it might have been worse. You know what I mean by that, father," with a sharp little nod.

"You are sure he—sure he don't know about—"

"As certain as one can be of anything in which a man like Nash Whildon has a finger," said Nadine, as the colonel stumbled over his question. "I am positive he knows nothing about that matter. I am almost sure he does not even suspect. But we have no time to lose in finishing our work in that quarter. It must be complete before the men come again—you concede that?"

"But Whildon?" hesitated Falconer. "Will he stand it?"

Nadine laughed, hardly, shortly.

"If he is kept in the dark until all is over, what can we do?"

"But—won't he suspect, then?"

"And if he should, what of it? Where can he find anything to confirm that suspicion? Who is he to look to for information?"

"It's an ugly affair, and the more I think of it, the less I like it!" frowned the colonel, licking his parched lips and casting a furtive glance toward the decanter near at hand.

"It is ten times uglier than you even suspect!" uttered Nadine, leaning forward and speaking swiftly. "I told you I was waiting for the Weasel to report. He came, and this is what he discovered."

"Our fears were correct. Angel Sam knows who the girl he calls his daughter really is; or, if not quite that, he is on the right track. He knows that you hired that French rascal to kill the infant. Instead, he spared his life, giving the babe to Angel Sam and his wife, who reared it as their own."

"He knows this?" gasped the colonel, turning paler than ever.

"And he is seeking to discover still more. He has sent a friend to San Antonio, to find French Poley and bring him here to identify you as the man who paid him gold to murder the infant!"

"Not Pink Archer?" hoarsely ejaculated the colonel.

A look of surprise came into the face of his daughter at this.

"What put that wild idea into your head?" she exclaimed, with a low laugh of scornful derision. "Pink Archer was making love to Angel Nell, the Weasel said, but he was positive neither of the young couple even so much as suspected the part Sam was playing. It may be that he hopes to give them a glad surprise. It may also be that he is playing simply to feather his own nest, by extorting a heavy sum from you, as hush-money: he and this friend, and this French Poley!"

Falconer seemed stung to fury by this speech. He flung back his head with a defiant flash in his blood-veined eyes. There was more of sharp decision in his tones than at any time since Nadine forced her way into the room.

"If he thinks that, he'll get left—bad! I'll never wait for them to get a good ready! I'll—"

"Remain quiet and patient until I say it is time to make a move," sharply interrupted Queen Nadine, grasping an arm across the table.

"I have been thinking since I heard this: thinking deep and thoroughly. I have almost perfected a plan that will not only discomfit Angel Sam, but bury even the ghost of the terrible blunder you committed so many years ago."

"He swore he'd do it, and I never thought of failure, until—"

"Until you saw French Poley in San Antonio, and lost your nerve when he tried to bleed you on that old score," with a sneer that she took no pains to disguise. "If it had been me—bah! there would have been a dead man for breakfast!"

She rose from her seat, and without another word turned and left the room. Colonel Falconer sat silent until the faint echo of her footsteps died away. Then he locked the door and returned to his brandy.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Don Ruez, the Rustler.

THE sun was just disappearing from view on the day succeeding, when Queen Nadine rode briskly away from Falcon Ranch, alone and unattended.

She put her good steed to his speed, and covered the ground rapidly until the buildings behind were lost to view, then permitted the animal to assume a more leisurely gait.

There was time enough, and she knew that the man whom she was riding to meet would wait patiently enough, even though she might be hours later than the time appointed.

"If he only knew!" she laughed, with a scornful glance in the direction of the Open Hand Ranch. "I almost wish he did! I almost wish his evil fate might send him to the rendezvous this evening! Wouldn't it be glorious? Apart from the result, it would be well worth looking

at; two such hot-heads leaping at each others' throats."

Her musical laugh floated away over the plain, sounding as gay and free from care as though she was not living over a volcano.

The moon had not yet risen, but the stars were shining brilliantly and gave light sufficient to show how smooth, how untroubled, how beautiful was her face just then. There was not a sign of care or trouble to be noted. One would have thought her the happiest of the happy, then.

A smart touch of her gilt spur sent the good steed on at a more rapid gait, and after covering several miles more, Queen Nadine drew rein in front of a small timber island, where the trunks were pretty well grown up with bushes and brambles.

She put the butt of her whip to her red lips, but before she could sound the whistle, a dark figure sprang out of the darkness, reaching her side a moment later, putting up his arms to assist her from the saddle, murmuring in a deep, mellow voice:

"At last! My angel!"

The words were in Spanish, and in like notes Nadine laughed:

"Still the same, my friend? Still the same hot-head? Still the same adorer of a poor, counterfeit image?"

While speaking she slipped from the saddle, half-reclining for an instant in his ardent embrace after her feet touched ground. A bearded lip touched hers, with a passionate fervor that sent a thrill flashing through her veins.

"You do love me, a little, Don Ruez?" she murmured, bending back her head until she could gaze into his face.

A handsome face it was, too, though after a somewhat fierce, barbaric style. A face that would involuntarily cause the observer to think of smugglers, of brigands, of mountain guerrillas.

"A little—no! An ocean—a world, with heaven and hell combined—yes!" was the quick, almost fierce response. "But why do ask me that? You do not love me enough to feel jealousy!"

"Would I be here, Don Ruez, if I loved you not?" Queen Nadine responded, with pained reproach in both face and tones. "Would your lips have touched mine, and life still be yours, if I loved you not? Am I not a true Spaniard? Do I not carry this?"

A slender-bladed knife flashed in the starlight, rising and then descending swift as thought, pausing only when its keen point actually pricked through the embroidered spenser worn by the Mexican.

With another low, musical laugh, Queen Nadine drew back her hand, slipping the gleaming blade into her bosom from whence it had flashed. She bent her head forward, and pressed her red lips to his with an ardor such as few women could have feigned.

Then, deftly slipping from his tightening embrace, she laughed:

"Let that suffice, Don Ruez, for the present. We must not forget that it is business which brings us here at this late hour of the night—business of more importance than the interchange of love-vows between two who are so wholly each other's as well. Is it not so?"

"It is always so of late!" muttered the Mexican with gloomy tones. "It is always business first, business last, business all the time!"

Queen Nadine drew back with an air of offended dignity, and her tones rung out hardly as she retorted:

"Is it so much harder on you than it is on me, Don Ruez? Is it so wearisome for you to take a ride—bah!" with sharp impatience, as she turned toward her motionless steed. "I know who will do my bidding, and never once hint at regret or impatience! I will call on him, henceforward, since you—"

Don Ruez caught her arm with one hand, the other extending a knife toward her, half forcing his head bowed, his voice humility itself.

"I was a fool, my queen; punish me! Strike, and end it all—but do not add torture to punishment by leaving your slave in anger!"

Again did Queen Nadine feel that peculiar thrill as she listened. She knew he was in sober earnest. She knew that he loved her so passionately that he preferred death to her going away in anger. It was for this submission she played, but in gaining it, she felt she was acting a most contemptible role.

"It would be a stroke worthy the Cid Camador, Ruez!" she softly uttered, gently pushing back the proffered weapon. "Since it would be letting out two lives at a single stroke!"

"Then I am forgiven?" tremblingly asked the outlaw, with a strangely shy glance into her beautiful face.

"By this signet you shall know it!" laughed Nadine, dropping a kiss on his high temple, then drawing an arm through her own, as she turned once more toward the timber island.

"It is not often that any one passes by this way, after nightfall, Don Ruez, but it is always well enough to act with full care. We will enter, and at our old trysting place, talk over this important business of ours."

A wave of her hand caused her well-trained steed to follow them, and taking a barely perceptible path, they entered the timber, passing along until nearly at the center, where a small spring bubbled up from a low pile of rocks. Immediately around this spring was an open space into which the stars shed sufficient light for features to be recognized even though the subtler changes of expression might escape detection.

"You have been waiting—how long, Don Ruez?"

"Since before the sun went to rest," was the response.

"Then, of course there is no possible chance for an enemy to have hidden himself in the motte," said Queen Nadine, with a degree of satisfaction and relief.

"If a ghost had tried to steal into the motte, I would have heard it, my angel!"

"For a ghost—that!" and Nadine made a gesture of contempt. "It is only the living we have to fear and guard against in this world. In the other—time enough when it opens to our eyes!"

Don Ruez made no reply. He was eager to get down to business, to remove it as soon as possible, and thus leave room for love-making.

Queen Nadine seemed to divine his wishes, and promptly opened the ball. There is no particular need to record her words in full. Enough for present purposes that she spoke without reserve as far as she went, and had there been an eavesdropper hidden in those shades, he might well have opened his eyes with amazement.

For enough was said to show that Queen Nadine, Don Ruez, and her father, were all law-breakers of the most dangerous sort. They talked of cattle-stealing in the past; of smuggling across the border, both north and south; and of raids as yet only projected, by which they hoped to make money enough to forever quit the risky business.

"And then, my queen?" murmured Don Ruez. "How much longer am I to wait for my rich reward? When am I to enter the gates of Paradise?"

Nadine laughed softly, even as she struck down the hand that was stealing around her waist.

"Very soon, now, my impatient knight! Only—there is still work to be done! Work that I dare not intrust to less competent hands than those of my Ruez!"

"You have only to say what you wish done, and if mortal man can bring it to pass, that obstacle shall not long bar the way," quietly answered the rustler.

"You love me so well, then, Ruez?" softly murmured Nadine, drawing a little closer, her hands resting on his broad shoulders, her great eyes glowing steadily into his fierce black orbs.

"I love you, my angel. That is all I can say, for what are words? Empty sound, forgotten as soon as uttered! I love you. In those words might be crowded all the world!"

"You love me better than all the other women in the world?"

"I know but one woman. You are she."

"You do love me, then!" with a soft exultation in her musical tones that made his strong frame quiver again. "I was wrong to doubt your love, even for a moment. And yet—what proof are you willing to give that you are not mistaken, my Ruez?"

"Whatever you ask, my queen. I am ready—and waiting!"

She bent still closer, until her warm breath fanned his cheek.

"Even if I were to bid you kill? If I asked the death of a woman?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A COMPACT SEALED—AND WITNESSED.

NEARER her face drew to his: brighter grew her eyes as they keenly sought for an answer that might be truer than the one his lips were forming. But not a shade crept over that darkly handsome face. Even her close scrutiny failed to detect the slightest shrinking, the most evanescent symptom of disgust, or doubt, or of reluctance.

"Though that woman looked at me with my mother's eyes, I would strike her to the heart at your bidding, my queen."

Quietly, evenly, without the least effort at display. The manner of one who can be depended upon to do precisely what is asked.

Although Queen Nadine had not really anticipated a different response, knowing Ruez the rustler so well, she drew a deep breath of intense relief as his deep, mellow tones came in answer.

She was in no such haste now. She knew that her end was assured, and she took time to glance rapidly over the minor details of the bold scheme in which she wanted this bold outlaw to play a part. It was a ticklish story she had to tell, and Don Ruez was a dangerous tool to play with. If he loved her so intensely, just so he could hate. And with one of his nature, there is but a single step from one to the other.

"It will not call for such heroism on your part, my Ruez," she at length uttered, her interlocked fingers resting on his shoulder, her lustrous eyes gazing into his with a mingled ardor

and proud reserve that few women could have so adroitly counterfeited. "It is a stranger whom you must get out of my path—our path, remember, my Ruez."

"Where will I find her, my queen? When will you be best pleased to have the work completed?"

"I will tell you shortly. First—I am about to put your love and trust to a terrible test, Don Ruez!"

"If I fail you, you know the road to my heart, Nadine."

Even then Queen Nadine hesitated, a slight shiver running over her lissom frame. How would this hot-brain receive her story? Yet she must run the risk of feeling his jealous knife in her heart. He was all she could really depend upon. Without his aid she would be forever lost!

"If I were to say to you, Don Ruez, within the week, I am to become the bride of another man?"

"I would hunt out that man, and kill him. Then I would come to you, and the world would find us united—in death," was the slow, even response, though there was an almost scorching blaze in the black eyes that so keenly looked into her beautiful face.

"But if I were to add to those words, in explanation, that I really had no intention of keeping the pledge given this man, my Ruez?"

"I would believe you, and wait until after the appointed hour. Then, if all proved as you said, we would drink to the fool. If not—"

The sentence was left unfinished. There was no need to end it in words, since Queen Nadine fully understood what that hiatus indicated.

"You know the master of the Open Hand Ranch, Don Ruez?"

"I have heard of him—have seen him at least once."

"You would recognize him, even in the dark?"

"I never forget a face, voice or shape. I would recognize him."

"In five days from now, that man must be a corpse, Ruez!"

"He is no better than a dead man, my queen."

"There must be no mistake, or on the fifth night I might be forced to become his wife, Ruez!"

"He shall never see the sun rise again!" with fierce emphasis.

For the first time since that strange dialogue began, the rustler showed signs of broken quiet. In one hand flashed an ugly-looking knife, while the other was tightly clinched and shaken above his head. His tones were deep and harsh, with a snarling echo running through them. His face was fairly transfigured with savage hatred.

And, hard as it is to record the fact, Queen Nadine laughed softly, admiringly at his vicious outburst.

She felt a strange, wild exultation which it is almost impossible to express in words. She could play on the heart and brain of this strong, fearless man as deftly as ever her fingers touched the strings of guitar or mandolin. To him, the slightest motion of her white finger was as the waving of a mighty scepter.

She no longer feared for the result as at first. The worst was told, and his jealousy had not overwhelmed her. The rest would be comparatively easy for one who had so carefully marked out a path to follow to the end.

"It is true, my Ruez, that the Open Hand must lose its present master, but not just yet. There is work for him to do. He must help to guide the steel to his own heart—see?"

"It shall be as you say, Nadine," slowly. "He is reprieved, but only for a time. Even you dare not ask me let him live through the full five days!"

"You would refuse even my request, then?"

"I love you."

All was contained in those three words. Not even the woman he so completely loved could tide Nash Whildon over the night set for his marriage.

With a low, merry laugh, Queen Nadine tapped him softly on the cheek with the tips of her fingers.

"It is enough, my Ruez! I will torment thee no longer, sweet as it is to see how thoroughly thou art in earnest—precious as such a proud triumph is to the fond heart that beats for thee alone!"

Instantly the rustler calmed down. There was just the ghost of a threat in his manner as he slowly uttered:

"It is all a jest! It is only to try your power over your slave, Queen Nadine! There is no talk of marriage between him and thee!"

A swift and complete change came over the amazon at this. Her voice grew more business-like, her face hardened under the starlight.

"That is just what I sent for you to bear explained, Don Ruez. This accursed Gringo has been playing the spy to good purpose. He has discovered that you gentlemen across the border have allies on this side. He knows that I am one of the family, and by threatening to expose me to the men whose herds we have turned into good gold, he thinks to win me for a wife, and

gain full possession of Falcon Ranch. Shall he succeed in his plans, Don Ruez?"

"When shall he go to his father, the devil, Nadine?"

Queen Nadine stamped her spurred heel fiercely into the ground, a Spanish oath hissing through her white teeth.

"If it was only him, he would be gone ere this—before the words died away upon his sneering lips! It is not Nadine Falconer who would have waited for even you to avenge her!"

"There is room below for others, my queen," with grim candor.

"And that room shall soon be occupied, too! But listen, Don Ruez, and I will show you the scheme I have decided to carry out."

"That man took advantage of a favoring chance, and before all our neighbors announced our speedy marriage. I could not deny him then. I could only wait and plan his ruin."

"For this reason, among others, he must not die too soon. He must live on until almost at his coveted triumph. Not quite—I myself would kill him at the feet of the priest, were you to fail me."

"There shall be no failure on my part. Tell me just what you wish me to do, then forget it all. Your will shall be carried out."

"How long will it take you to collect a dozen of your band?"

"Three hours. I did not know just what was wanted, so I brought a few trusty hands with me."

"Then that point is settled!" with a breath of relief. "And now, for this man who thinks to claim an unwilling bride. You know where he lives. You know the trail by which he reaches Falcon Ranch. And you can find plenty of places along that trail where you can lie in wait to capture him at the proper moment."

"You mean kill him, of course?"

Queen Nadine flung out one hand impatiently. "Kill him, if you like the term better. All I stipulate for is his silence. But, to guard against accidents, there must be a false trail for curious eyes and busy tongues. Listen:

"I will give you time enough to do the work as it should be done. If you like, I will give you a sign that will introduce you to all the men on Open Hand Ranch who are members of our organization."

"I have the signs, the passwords, my queen. I know some of the men, and through them I can easily learn the rest."

"Then there will be still less difficulty than I had calculated upon," with a gratified nod.

"You will see these men. You will let them know you are acting by authority. You will bid them get all in readiness for a mock raid on the Open Hand Ranch, just before the time set for the wedding. And in that raid, which will be beaten off by the brave defenders, the master will come by his death. You see, my Ruez?"

"The master will be killed. And his body?"

"Must be found and identified. As he will have died in open battle, you must be careful to cover your tracks. I do not forbid torture, but you can make him suffer in mind, even more than in body."

A hard, cruel laugh broke from the rustler's lips.

"He will hardly find a bed of roses, I fear! But you spoke of a woman: what about her?"

"That is another of my reasons for giving this Gringo so long a grace, Don Ruez. While waiting for him, you can complete the other work. You know the miserable Gringo who lives by the hills, east of Falcon Ranch? Angel Sam, people call him."

"I know of him. He has a skeleton of a herd, too poor for men of our business to bother with."

"There is a young woman living with him: his daughter. To-morrow night, or any other night that best suits you—"

"It is your will, my queen, that is to rule."

"Then, to-morrow night you will take enough of your men to that place. You will silence every living soul you find in the cabin, then run off his cattle. That will cover your tracks well. It will be laid to petty rustlers, and no eyes will be turned in our direction. Of course, if you prefer, your men can run the bunch over the river. It may be just as well, on second thoughts. You can have plenty of aid from here to carry out the other trick."

"And when all is done, my queen?" slowly demanded the rustler, his eyes all aglow, his face lit up with strong passions, though his voice was held so completely under control. "When your pathway is smooth and clear, what is to follow?"

"If I leave you to say, my Ruez?" softly murmured Nadine.

"Do you dare say so much?" with sternly repressed fire.

"Why not? It is to be, sometime! Why not—wait!" springing back with uplifted hand as the rustler stretched out his hands to fold her in his bosom. "One moment, my Ruez!"

"Ever thus! But I wait. It is only to drink deeper of bliss when the cup at last touches my lips!" he muttered, falling back in prompt obedience to his changeable love.

"That waiting shall soon end, my Ruez! I, like you, am growing tired of the long, dreary delay. I, like you, yearn for the happy days

when we need no longer wear the mask—when you and I will be forever together, with all the world before us!

"But still we must act with prudence. We must wait until this excitement shall have died out. Until there is no more talk of how the master of Open Hand Ranch came by his death on his wedding eve?"

"And then?"

"You shall name your own reward, my Ruez!"

One fierce, passionate embrace Nadine permitted. Then they turned and left the timber island, riding away toward Falcon Ranch, never once suspecting that their every word had been overheard, their every action noted by the cunning trailer who lay beneath the brambles near the spring.

And then, when their forms had vanished in the distance, this spy left the motte, striding swiftly toward Falcon Ranch. And the starlight revealed the tall, muscular figure of Red Clam, the Kickapoo!

CHAPTER XXXV. THE RUSTLER DETECTIVE.

It was mid-forenoon of the day succeeding the interview between Queen Nadine and Ruez the Rustler, that Angel Sam looked up with a dark frown to recognize Royal Hart and his red pard, the Silent Kickapoo.

"Top o' the morning to ye, daddy!" cheerily cried out the Bounding Buck, his blue eyes roving swiftly around as though in search of another. "Haven't heard anything from Pink Archer, have you?"

"He ain't round yere, ef that's what you want," surlily.

"Well, I hardly dared hope he had got back from Santone, as yet, but thought it no harm to ask the question."

Angel Sam turned almost green in the face at this cool speech. He feared coming trouble, and he did not know how best to guard against it.

A low laugh broke from the lips of Royal Hart, and there was a half-scornful, half-pitying look in his eyes as he tapped the old man on an arm.

"You're mighty right, daddy; there is trouble brewing, and you're mixed up in it, too, the worst kind! But, that trouble don't come from our direction, mind ye! Instead, I've come to give you warning that it is time you were hunting your hole in good earnest!"

"I hain't done nothin' ag'in' the law," doggedly muttered Sam. "You don't dast to lay the weight o' a finger onto me! I'm old, but I kin make my teeth meet in the flesh, even yit, ef I'm 'posed onto! You hear?"

"And heed," with sudden gravity. "Look here, Angell; we've come to-day to do you a kindness, mainly on account of our mutual friend, Pink Archer, and the lady whom he hopes to make his wife."

"What you know 'bout all that?" gasped Sam starting back.

"Listen, and I'll try to explain. In a hurry though he left you, for Santone, Pink found time to look me up and beg me to keep an eye open in this direction. He told me what he had to fear on her account, and begged me to see that no harm befell her during his absence."

"He never said nothin' to me!" muttered Angell, dubiously.

"How much time had he for saying anything?" with a passing frown.

This was true. After consulting over the strange and wonderful prospect which seemed to be opening before Angel Nell, Pink Archer resolved to lose no time in seeking out French Poley at San Antonio. Even with his greatest haste, he might be too late to find his man. French Poley had said that he intended to settle down in town for a time, but he was a rolling stone, and liable to change his mind and his location at any hour.

"I am a friend of Pink Archer, and I want to play friend to both the lady he loves and her father. Archer said that I could trust you, and in proof that I take him at his word—look!"

Opening his clothes over the breast, Royal Hart revealed a detective's badge lying next the skin. Only for a moment; then the tell-tale bit of metal was hidden from view.

"That ought to show you I'm not an enemy of yours, daddy," softly laughed the detective. As well as you can tell me, I know what the life of a detective is worth in this region; I know that were my real business known, nothing short of riding a streak of lightning could get me out of the country quick enough to save my life. But I am not afraid to trust you, for more reasons than one."

"I hain't no great love fer men o' your caliber, I'm free to own, but ef you're a friend o' Pink Archer—"

"As I will soon prove," nodded the Rustler Detective, briskly. "But first, I'll give you an inkling as to what brought me into these parts. I want a man for murder, committed back East. I've been on his track for a long time, but never really struck oil until I came to this particular portion of reigned. That man is Nash Whildon. You know him. You know what a power he is in these parts. You know that if you were to send a whisper to him of what I have

admitted, he would run me down with his human bloodhounds, too quick!"

Angel Sam nodded his gray head, with a grim smile. He could readily believe all this, and so believing, he was beginning to look with more favor upon this detective. Surely he could mean no evil to him or his, else he would hardly have placed such a dangerous weapon in his hands!

"That is one reason," smiled Royal Hart, who seemed able to read below the surface without a balk. "I want to help you and the little lady, for my new pard's sake. I can't well do that without first winning your confidence. You sabe, my friend?"

"It ain't—they ain't no trouble comin' from that-a-way?" muttered Angel Sam, with an uneasy glance in the direction of Falcon Ranch.

"I'd like to say no, but I'm constitutionally opposed to lying when there isn't anything to be gained by so doing," smiled Royal Hart in reply. "There is trouble brewing, and it does come from that quarter, I'm sorry to say. And yet—you ought to have known it must come, some time, after what French Poley told you down Santone way!"

Angel Sam shivered as though an icy blast had suddenly swept over him. His fingers closed and unclosed nervously. His voice was shaky as he stammered:

"I didn't—I couldn't—what could I do?" flashing out in angry desperation. "All I've got in the world lays right here! Ef I was to throw that away, what was to 'come o' birdy?"

"Property is a mighty-good thing, when a body can enjoy it. But it don't count for much when that body is a dead body!"

"They wouldn't dar'! They wouldn't dar', even ef they was to suspect the bull truth!" stammered Angel Sam, brushing the cold drops from his paling face.

"So I might have said, only for the tidings Red Clam brought me last night," was the earnest response. "I could hardly believe but what pard had been snoozing, and dreamed it all. I made him tell it all over again, just as I'd have him tell it now for your benefit, if you were smart enough in sign language to take it in."

"What was it? What did he see or hear? Durn it, man!" with sudden rage, clenching his bony hands and looking as though he would leap at the throat of this cool detective in another instant. "Cain't you spit it out? Shell I tar the words out o' your heart?"

"I'll not trouble you so far, daddy," with a low laugh. "You might break your fingernails, and certainly would soil my rigging. So—open your ears, and I'll give you a synopsis of the real facts."

Clearly, succinctly, the detective told how Red Clam eavesdropped Queen Nadine and Ruez the Rustler at the timber island. He concealed nothing that concerned Angel Sam and Nellie, but passed over the plot against Nash Whildon in silence.

Sam listened in silence, almost stunned by a knowledge of the danger which threatened his "birdy." And pitying his evident misery, Royal Hart cut his recital as short as he could without marring the details.

"That's the neat little arrangement our tender-hearted friends have decided upon, but—don't they wish they may get it?"

"We've got to go—got to run fer it!" huskily mumbled the old man, staggering as he turned the cabin, only to be checked by the firm but kindly grip of the detective.

"There's time enough and to spare, daddy," he said, with a cheery laugh that was medicine to the sorely shaken veteran. "Such wolves do all their prowling after dark, and long before that time you and the little lady shall be in perfect safety. You will trust us?"

"Kin I help it?" huskily demanded Sam, his eyes bloodshot, his weatherbeaten face even more haggard than ordinary. "But ef you play her false—ef you try any foul tricks—look out fer Sam! I'm a misable wreck, jest now, but that'd make a giant out o' me—fer her!"

"I swear that we mean nothing but good to you and your daughter," earnestly responded the detective, forcing the old man to look him squarely in the face. "I swear that we will save your child from her enemies, though it costs us both our lives. Can I say more?"

"Don't lay it up ag'in' the ole man, sir," muttered Sam, his eyes filling with tears such as he had not known for many a long year. "I'm gittin' played out, I reckon, from the way things shake an' shiver me all over! I ain't no 'count any mo', 'pears like! No 'count 'cept to love the little birdy as is all I've got left in this world!"

He hardly knew what he was saying, but even Red Clam seemed to appreciate its meaning at its full worth, for he caught one skinny hand and pressed it over his own heart, then glanced upward. It may well be doubted if Angel Sam comprehended his real meaning, but the action seemed to do him good. And under the cheery talk of the Rustler Detective, he gradually recovered his wonted composure in a great measure.

Not until Angel Sam was tolerably composed did Royal Hart suggest a visit to the cabin where Nellie was at work. Sam eagerly assented, for he now placed implicit confidence in his

new friends and protectors, and his tongue was by far the busiest in winning Angel Nell over to the same view of the matter.

And shortly after noon, each one bearing a small parcel of necessities, they deserted the little cabin, falling back into the hills, to finally pause at a small but not uncomfortable cave which Red Clam revealed. And there the two wards left Angel Sam and Nellie, bidding them keep up good courage, assuring them that the clouds would speedily roll by, leaving all clear and peaceful.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"YOUR BRIDE SHALL BE DEATH!"

NASH WHILDON found these seven days difficult to classify, whenever he sat down to coolly, carefully review their events.

At one moment he felt himself in the seventh heaven of delight. Nadine was so gentle, so kind, so loving, so altogether different from the proud, haughty, scornful amazon whom he had so vainly courted. Already he fondly told himself that his mighty passion for this beautiful creature was winning her love in return. And if such a change was wrought in a few days, what would be the result a month later?

Then a word, a glance, an action, would cast him back into the depths once more. Nadine was simply making the best of a bad bargain. She hated and despised him for forcing her into a union. She would never learn to love nor to forgive.

Nadine might have been content with the measure of revenge which she reaped during those days, but she was not. She knew that Nash Whildon was suffering, and this knowledge lent her renewed strength and subtlety. She needed them, for she, too, failed to find this interval a bed of roses.

Still, nothing occurred to change the hour set for the ceremony, and as the afternoon of the all-important day waned rapidly, Nash Whildon mounted his horse and set out for Falcon Ranch, where he would have been hours before, only for the playfully serious interdiction of his blushing bride-elect.

For once in his life, the master of Open Hand Ranch was perfectly happy. Not the slightest cloud obscured his mental horizon. Not the faintest doubt came to ruffle his mind.

Poor devil!

His horse started to one side with a frightened snort, but before its master could touch a weapon, or even glance around in quest of the alarming object, the oiled noose of a lasso closed over his neck, and a vicious jerk tore him from the saddle.

The fall stunned him, and it was many minutes before he recovered his consciousness, to find himself bound hand and foot, with his back supported against a tree-trunk.

"Hal sluggard with the heavy eyes! Is it thus thou wouldst o'erstep the hour of thy wedding? Is it after this fashion thou heepest tryst with her Excellency, Queen Nadine?"

At that name, Nash Whildon uttered a savage roar of fury and threw all his powers into the effort to burst his bonds. Not that he suspected the truth for even an instant, but because he feared a malicious fate was about to rob him of his prize, even as he saw it fairly within his grasp.

Don Ruez, the Rustler, made no move to interfere. He had applied the bonds, and knew that they would hold a giant helpless. And so knowing, he stood motionless, save for the mocking laugh that curled his jetty beard. Motionless until the captive exhausted his strength in fruitless struggles. Until Nash Whildon sat glaring helplessly into his face—the face of the man who hated him more than all the world beside!

"Who are you?" he gasped, huskily. "What does this mean? I will pay you anything—I will make you rich for life—only set me free and let me go my way!"

Don Ruez laughed mockingly, his jetty orbs flashing fire.

"If you could cover your range a foot deep with refined gold; if you could change each one of your cattle into diamonds of the purest water; if you could do all this, and beg me to accept the whole in return for your life and liberty from this moment until the sun rose tomorrow morning, I would laugh at you as I do now."

"Who am I? Don Ruez, the Rustler! Your bitterest enemy, but Queen Nadine's dearest friend! Ha! that stings you, dog of a Gringo!"

For the first time, an inkling of the horrible truth seemed to flash across the whirling brain of the captive. For the first time he began to see how thoroughly he had been duped by the woman whom he loved so madly—whom he thought to win by force!

In the awful pallor that stole into his face, the rustler read something of this, and he laughed again, as a veritable fiend might laugh over the destruction of a human soul. Already his revenge was begun! Already this insolent Gringo was paying the heavy debt he owed Queen Nadine!

"It is so, what your crack-brain whispers, snar," he bowed, mocking humility for the instant. "The humble, miserable thief, smug-

gler, ladrone, footpad, dares make that claim. And even beyond that!" with fierce triumph breaking through the thin mask. "Queen Nadine is my promised bride! When you are forming a feast for worms, she will be breathing love sighs in my arms!"

Once again did the master of Open Hand Ranch strive to burst his bonds—to free even a single hand with which to choke these infernal lies to silence. They were lies! He would never believe that Queen Nadine had betrayed him! And even as the vow flashed across his brain, it was branded as false: for he knew that it was truth this self-confessed outlaw was speaking.

"Are your eyes beginning to open to the truth as yet, my friend?" sneered the Mexican, squatting on his heels before his helpless rival, and deftly rolling up a cigarette. "Is your brain growing cool and steady enough to understand the words I am waiting to speak for your delectation before bidding you a long farewell? If so—I proceed. If not—there is still a little time for wasting."

Whatever the cause, Nash Whildon suddenly seemed to recover all his usual coolness. He ceased his struggles, and though his breath came in short, labored pants, that was because of his terrible exertions. And when he spoke his tones were steady and clear:

"Speak out what you have to say, you grinning cur! But beware how you insult the lady whose name you have already taken in vain. I will hear nothing against her!"

"Queen Nadine? It is not these lips—the lips against which she has so often and so passionately pressed hers!—that could say aught against her! I, her lover, her soon-to-become husband? Thrice accursed Gringo, thou art mad!"

Nash Whildon made no reply. Despite his struggles to the contrary, he was fast becoming convinced that he owed this captivity to the woman who had sworn to marry him that same evening! It was more bitter than death!

And Ruez the Rustler did not spare him a single pang. Although he had hardly been aware of such a person drawing the breath of life before that night interview with Nadine, the words she uttered then made him hate Nash Whildon beyond the power of words to tell.

Bit by bit he revealed the evil compact between himself and Queen Nadine. Word by word he recalled the instructions she had given him, dwelling longest on the hatred she had betrayed for this helpless wretch. And so, one after another, the rustler told of their nightly meetings, proving them by repeating the words that had fallen from her lips, making sport of her besotted lover.

"It is even so, poor fool! While the sun shone Queen Nadine forced herself to listen to your silly babble, the more surely to work your downfall. And when night came, she would hasten to meet her true lover, repaying herself by laughing to scorn your clumsy compliments."

"Why did she endure all this degradation? To save those who were joined with her in solemn compact! To blind your eyes and chain your tongue until it was forever too late for you to speak out—to proclaim the discoveries you have made! Not that she believed all you said. She soon learned how you lied when you threatened her with the written history which you declared you had placed in the hands of a trusted friend, to publish broadcast in case aught should happen to you. It was a clumsy lie at best, but you could not even stick to it—you had to let the truth leak out, and so all the more surely seal your fate!"

"It is this night you hoped to wed with her—with my queen! No doubt you have been counting the hours, the minutes, and cursing time for creeping along at such a sluggish pace. And now—the master of Open Hand Ranch shall have his bride, but he will not need to travel all the way to Falcon Ranch. It will not be Queen Nadine whose glowing lips he will press, for they are sacred to me—to Ruez the Rustler!"

"As for you—your bride shall be Death!"

Despite his natural courage, nerved now by a certainty that his desperate game had gone entirely against him, Nash Whildon shivered with fear as his captor hissed forth those words. It was not the eyes of a human being that glared upon him so savagely; they were the eyes of a demon, a monster wholly without mercy!

"It is time, accursed Gringo!" added Ruez, drawing a revolver from its scabbard and deftly rotating the cylinder across his palm. "I have yet to ride far—for I am one of the invited guests, remember! Your bride is waiting, señor! It is painful to part with such dear friends, but you will not long remember, you will soon forget!"

A brief period of awful silence, during which Nash Whildon stared helplessly into that grim muzzle—then a sharp explosion!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

ALL was life and bustle at Falcon Ranch, for the hour set for the much-talked-over wedding was now close at hand. And such was the interest excited by it, that not one of the guests

of Colonel Hugh Falconer's celebration had failed to put in an appearance.

Not altogether because a wedding was of rare occurrence on the range, though that fact probably had something to do with it. But in this union there was something out of the ordinary.

"Fact is," observed Parker Mandrake to a few confidential pals. "Fact is, gents, Whildon must have wrung in a cold deck on the queen; but I always said he'd get there!"

This seemed to be the general impression. Few could believe that Queen Nadine was marrying for love alone. And it was with a vague expectation of witnessing something beyond what was on the programme, that the large majority of the guests put in an appearance.

And Nadine? Almost feverishly gay to the outward eye, yet sorely anxious within, as she might well be.

It was from the lips of Ruez the Rustler himself that she first learned of the strange disappearance of Angel Sam and his daughter Nell. Not a sign was left behind, when the outlaw and his men stole up to the little cabin at the base of the hills, to carry out the merciless commands of his queen.

Nor had the mystery been solved up to this hour, though Queen Nadine kept the Weasel at work night and day during the interval. Even that accomplished spy and ferret had to own himself wholly at a loss.

Pink Archer, too, was among the missing, and though Queen Nadine sent out couriers far and wide, even to San Antonio, one and all failed to bring in the information she so eagerly longed for.

And with this haunting dread at her heart—the fear that Pink Archer had abandoned everything to steal away with the blue-eyed girl for whom he had rejected her love—Queen Nadine was forced to hide her real emotions and play the part of yielding woman to the man whom she learned to hate more intensely with the passage of each hour. And not only this, but she must also keep Ruez the Rustler in play.

Taken all-in-all, Queen Nadine was paying a heavy price for her anticipated victory over Nash Whildon!

But she showed nothing of this, as she moved proudly, yet gayly, through the brilliantly lighted rooms. Never before had she appeared to so much advantage. Never before so supremely beautiful. And never before had her wit sparkled so brilliantly as now, when she knew that ere long a thunderbolt must fall in the midst of this assemblage.

Already the hour named for the ceremony to begin, was past, and no one had seen aught of Nash Whildon. Where was he? Why had he not been here long ago, to help his bride-elect receive the company?

Such "frills" might serve in "the States," but it was not what one naturally looked for out here on the range. According to etiquette, perhaps, but—

Or was this the turn which matters were to take? Such a curious courtship had ought to wind up with a surprise of some sort, but who would have predicted that Nash Whildon would be the one to take the initiative? Who would have thought the bridegroom would turn up missing?

"It gets me—gets me 'bad!" murmured Parker Mandrake feebly. "If I had to lay a bet, I'd shut my eyes an' let 'er float where she liked! This sort o' thing knocks sober judgment galley-west!"

Without, the cowboys from a score of ranches were gathered, for Colonel Hugh Falconer sagely said that a man with but one child did not have a wedding in the family every day, and this one should be made memorable in the annals of the range. And just as Parker Mandrake put his puzzled opinion on record, a loud, ringing cheer arose from a hundred throats at once, and instantly all jumped to the conclusion that the dilatory bridegroom had at last deigned to put in an appearance.

All save Queen Nadine and, possibly, the colonel. They turned paler, and seemed to brace themselves for an anticipated shock.

Louder grew the cheers of the cowboys, and Nadine involuntarily stole one hand to the dagger that nestled in her bosom, for this was hardly the cadence she anticipated: for the angry alarm appropriate to the mock raid which Ruez the Rustler was to make on Open Hand.

And then—she stood as though petrified.

For through the opening door, the tall, graceful figure of Nash Whildon strode, his blue eyes fixed upon her ghastly face with a cold, merciless smile.

"Am I too late? Have I sinned against all forgiveness, Nadine? Yet it was not my fault if I have kept the guests waiting."

Clear, mocking, almost venomous the tones, and Queen Nadine shrunk back with a low, gasping cry of despair.

This was no spirit—no ghost from beyond the grave! This was Nash Whildon in life, and Ruez the Rustler had failed her.

She knew, too, that the master of Open Hand Ranch knew everything. She could read it in his eyes, in his curling lips, in his pale, merciless countenance. Knew all—knew how cunningly she had befooled him through all those days,

only to the more surely lure him on to death at the hands of a merciless rival.

He had escaped—to hasten here, not to keep his wedding vows, but to bring the avalanche down upon her head.

At this thought her veins seemed to fill with fire. She forgot everything else in the one mad, insane lust for vengeance. And with an almost maniacal scream, she plucked the dagger from her bosom and leaped toward Nash Whildon, hissing:

"Die, you cur! Die before you—"

Impetuous as was her action, a still swifter hand arrested her mad progress. Royal Hart leaped between the twain, deftly wresting the dangerous toy from her hand and tossing it over his shoulder, then holding the infuriated beauty helpless, smiling coldly into her blazing eyes as he uttered:

"You might hurt somebody, ma'am, and that would be awfully awkward on a solemn occasion like this! Pray subside, won't you?"

Colonel Falconer stood like one petrified at the unexpected appearance of Nash Whildon, but as he saw his daughter struggling vainly to free herself from the firm grasp of his newly appointed overseer, an oath grated through his teeth and he whipped forth a revolver.

Only to have the weapon torn from his hands by a grip of steel! And as he was twisted about, he met the glowing eyes of Red Clam, the Silent Kickapoo.

All this occurred in such swift succession that not a hand could be lifted, not a voice raised in protest by the guests until the double arrest was made. Then all was confusion. Women screamed and covered their eyes with trembling hands. Men cursed and drew their weapons, though hardly knowing what they were to do.

There was a steady rush from the courtyard, and a score of armed men quietly ranged themselves close along the walls, while Pink Archer, who seemed to be at their head, stepped in front with uplifted hand.

"Hold, gentlemen! This is not a matter for you to mix in. Keep your temper until you learn just what it does mean, or some of you may not live long enough to repent of your rashness!"

Probably no other man in all that company could have so quickly brought order out of confusion. Every one present knew and respected the ex-foreman of Falcon Ranch. Each one was willing to wait at his stern command, at least until they had a fairer inkling of the real facts than they had at that time.

"That's white and level-headed, gents!" laughed the Rustler Detective, as with a dexterous motion he brought Queen Nadine's wrists behind her back and snapped a glittering pair of handcuffs in place. "It's mighty little profit in bucking against the law, you know, and it's the law that has taken charge of this little affair."

Colonel Falconer heard these words, and with a desperate effort he tried to break away. Red Clam tightened his grip for a moment, then whirled the colonel around until he fell into the hands of Pink Archer. Then, without another glance at the man, he turned and passed out of the room.

"Friends and neighbors!" coldly uttered Nash Whildon, one hand grasping the butt of a cocked revolver as his eyes swiftly roved over the startled, perplexed faces. "This is hardly the fashion in which I fondly expected to stand before you this evening, but you'll have to make the best of it. I fully intended to keep my part of the bargain, but Miss Falconer was not content to leave well enough alone. She and her father are at the head of the rustlers who have been raiding our ranches! They were at the bottom of a big raid when Pierce Falconer was murdered! And worse—I swear that Hugh Falconer killed his own brother on that occasion!"

"A lie—a lie!" gasped the colonel, but giving himself the lie by his miserably ghastly face and trembling limbs.

As for Nadine, never a sound passed her lips. She stood erect, with her blazing eyes fixed on the face of the man whom she had so persistently deceived, knowing full well that nothing she could say or do now could keep the black truth from coming out.

"I knew this, yet I loved her so madly that I agreed to keep the secret if she would marry me. I make no other defense. I simply say that I loved her—how madly no words can fitly portray!"

"She agreed, as you all know. The day was set for our wedding. I would have played my part to the end, but she—she hired a man called Ruez to waylay and murder me. He kept his part of the compact as far as permitted. He had his revolver at my head, ready to blow out my brains, when this gentleman," with a side nod toward Royal Hart, "shot the rascal down and took me prisoner."

"Simply letting him go on a brief parole, the better to carry out a still more important part of the scheme, my good friends," bowed the Rustler Detective as he strode to the side of Nash Whildon and took the revolver from his hand.

For one instant it seemed as though the mas-

ter of Open Hand Ranch would resist, but then he bowed his head and held out his hands for the irons which were deftly snapped in place.

"It is an ugly duty at the best, good people," said Royal Hart, his face growing grave and hard. "I wish I could have spared you it. I wish I could have made these arrests after a more quiet fashion, but there was by far too much at stake to run any risks. You know how little men of my profession are liked in this section. You know—as I know—that without such a complete understanding as we can have under these circumstances, you would never permit me to take my prisoner out of the country without a desperate attempt at rescue."

"It isn't a dead sure thing, even now!" smiled Parker Mandrake.

"It will be sure death to the man who lifts the first finger, at all events," coldly retorted the detective, with a nod toward the picked men marshaled by Pink Archer.

Instantly a line of business-like revolvers rose to a level.

"Simply to show you that I am prepared to hold up my end, gentlemen," smiled the detective, blandly. "I don't want any row. I'll try every fair means to avoid it. But if it begins on your side, we'll do the best we know to sweep the board."

"You dare to arrest us on the bare assertion of that cur?" coldly demanded Queen Nadine, with a glance of loathing toward the master of the Open Hand. "And he a convict, according to your own telling?"

"As I said, ma'am, that is simply a branch of the play. I arrest you for attempted murder. I arrest your father for actual murder!"

"Both charges are lies, base as the lips that utter them! Who is it that dares couple our names with so foul a crime? Who brings the charge? Whom have we murdered?"

"I make the charge against yonder craven!" cried a clear, ringing voice, and the lithe figure of Angel Nell passed into the room. "I accuse Hugh Falconer of causing the death of Lucille Falconer, the wife of his brother—and of my mother!"

"And I am ready to swear the same!" came a deep, stern voice as Red Clam strode in through the door.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW ROYAL HART "GOT THERE."

FROM the moment the red pard flung him into the strong hands of Pink Archer, Colonel Hugh Falconer had not uttered a word or made even the slightest struggle. At each fresh point that was made against them, a shiver would creep through his cowering form, and it only required a single glance into his livid countenance for one to recognize the unmasked criminal.

When Angel Nell answered the fierce defiance of Queen Nadine, Falconer straightened up for an instant, until he recognized the speaker, then shivered and gasped for breath.

For one instant Pink Archer felt almost sorry for the wretch, despite all his crimes, but his grip tightened as that deep, vengeful voice followed: as the form of Red Clam strode into the room, pausing by the side of Angel Nell, whose arms clung lovingly to his, whose sunny head leaned confidently against his shoulder.

The form of the Silent Kickapoo, but no longer with bronzed skin, no longer in savage garb, no longer dumb!

"I charge you, Hugh Falconer, with causing the death of my wife, Lucille Falconer! I charge you with stealing my child, Angela! I charge you with attempting my death—with—"

Colonel Falconer straightened up despite the strong grip which Pink Archer kept upon his arms. He stared into that stern yet handsome face with a look of unutterable horror in his bloodshot eyes. Then—

"Pierce—returned to haunt—"

A wild, choking yell broke off the words, and he sunk back a lifeless weight in the arms of the ex-foreman of Falcon Ranch.

In the bright light there showed a gush of blood from his bearded lips.

Before the curiously tangled tale was fully told, the red light of another day was breaking over Falcon Ranch. Each one of the principal actors had to explain the part he had taken in the drama which ended with the death of Hugh Falconer. This took time, and would require too much space to be recorded in full at this late hour.

After the first few minutes of bewildered doubt, Pierce Falconer was fully recognized by many of the wedding guests, and this greatly lightened the task of the Rustler Detective. It insured him against molestation, and rendered a close guard over his prisoners unnecessary, so far as a rescue was concerned.

It was by his advice that Pierce Falconer—no longer Red Clam the Silent—stepped outside the ranch and briefly spoke to the intensely excited cowboys, promising them a more ample explanation at an early hour. And it was on his suggestion that the ranch-owners, with their wives and daughters, were told all before the party was broken up.

Before he came to Texas, Pierce Falconer

lived in South Carolina, where he had a fine plantation, a happy home, and all that mortal man could wish for.

He was very rich. He owned scores of valuable slaves, and besides the "Home Plantation" on which he resided for the better part of the year, he possessed much other property.

He was married, and had one child, then little more than an infant.

There was but one other in whose veins flowed kindred blood, and this brother, older, more wild and reckless, he had not seen for years.

Business called him to Charleston, and while there, word came that his mansion was burned to the ground, and that both wife and child had perished in the flames!

When he reached the scene of desolation, he was silently shown a few crumbling bones, which alone remained. They were given burial, and up to a few days since, he believed they were all that a terrible accident had left of his dear ones.

None could explain how the fire occurred. It broke out in the dead of night, and before aught could be done to rescue its inmates, the fatal flames had done their work.

Pierce Falconer never fully recovered from that awful blow. He lost all interest in his business. And when the civil war broke forth, he entered the Southern army, fighting recklessly until the end came. Then, gathering up what remained of his property, he turned his face westward, settling in Texas, to finally purchase Falcon Ranch.

It was here that his brother turned up, after so many years, bringing with him Nadine, his daughter by a Mexican wife. He received them kindly, and treated them as his kindred, only to meet with basest ingratitude at their hands.

If they did not themselves plan the great raid, Hugh Falconer and Nadine were directly implicated in it. Their prime incentive, beyond all reasonable doubt, was the death of their relative, when they would naturally fall heir to his property.

There was a fight at the ford of the Rio Grande, and Pierce Falconer was left to float down with the current, supposed to be dead.

A body was found, but it was not his. If Hugh Falconer permitted any friend to view the corpse before burial, he first mutilated the features beyond recognition. Then, with the owner "dead and buried," of course there was no further difficulty in taking possession of Falcon Ranch with its herds and droves.

But, Pierce Falconer was not dead. How he escaped with life from the river, he could not then explain. How he wandered so many miles into the interior, was equally a puzzle to him. Enough that it so transpired. Enough that for many long weeks he lay in bed, hovering between life and death, unable to utter a coherent word.

When he recovered his mind, he found Royal Hart watching over him. Not as a detective, though. Rather as a guest of the rancher who had so kindly taken the poor wanderer in and cared for him like a brother.

But when Pierce Falconer could tell his story, Royal Hart eagerly entered into the matter, and it was to his busy investigations, while Falconer was slowly recovering his strength of body, that the rancher owed a knowledge of his brother's foul play.

The result is readily understood. After committing such an atrocious crime, Hugh Falconer would hardly balk at another attempt to kill his brother. For this reason, among others to be afterward explained, it was determined for Pierce Falconer to appear on the scene in disguise. To perfect this, lest some keen ear should recognize his deep, peculiar voice, he pretended to be dumb. And the more surely to mask his features, he parted with his luxuriant beard, staining his skin to match the character he assumed.

"I was on a still hunt of my own, you see," airily added Royal Hart, taking up the thread in turn. "For nearly two years I had been looking after a Down-East criminal whom the galls just ached after, and just about this time I tumbled to the fact that I'd find my man in Nash Wildon, as you people have known the gentleman. I knew that you didn't love detectives to distraction, but I wanted my man, bad!"

"To throw dust into your eyes—for which I most humbly beg your pardon, from biggest to littlest—I tried to play the wild and woolly rover of the mighty West! That accounts for the Bounding Buck from Buffalo Wallow, you see!"

He told how a lucky chance first gave him a clue to the identity of Angel Nell. Told how "Red Clam" overheard the plot against Angel Sam and his supposed daughter, as well as the bold game Queen Nadine was playing to foil Nash Wildon.

He had come up just in time to save the master of the Open Hand Ranch, though the call was so close that he was forced to send a bullet through the brain of Ruez the Rustler in order to preserve the life of the man for whom he had hunted so long. After this, it was an easy matter to arrange with Nash Wildon—almost insane with fury and hatred at his being so shamelessly duped by the woman whom he adored—the denouement which they had witnessed.

Pink Archer told how he discovered "French Poley" at San Antonio, lying at the point of death, the result of injuries received in a drunken brawl. Told how the dying man swore he was hired by Hugh Falconer to steal and kill the child heiress of his brother. Swore that he was discovered by her mother, and to save himself, he killed her, then fired the building and fled with the child. He told how he gave the child to his pard, Sam Angell. His dying statement was signed and witnessed.

Hugh Falconer never recovered from the shock of his brother's return. Within an hour from the stroke, he died of hemorrhage of the lungs.

Nadine Falconer, still haughty, still defiant, was kept at Falcon Ranch for a few days, but she only received the kind words of her relatives with curses and threats. Nothing could soften her, and at last Pierce Falconer placed her under charge of a trusty escort with orders to take her across the border into Mexico, there to turn her free with gold enough to insure herself against want for life. The escort did their duty, and Queen Nadine was never after heard from.

Long before this, however, Royal Hart insisted on issuing invitations to all who had received them before, begging their presence at Falcon Ranch to witness the marriage of Angela Falconer, only child and heiress of Pierce Falconer, to Pink Archer.

Needless to say that every invitation was honored with an acceptance. Needless to say that the ceremony "went off" with much more smoothness than the prior one.

And "for this occasion only!" Royal Hart got gloriously boozed.

"Had to do it, you know, pard!" he seriously uttered the next day. "Had to keep up my end, don't you see? You were drunk—with happiness. I was drunk—with benzine! Just the difference 'twixt tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum!"

"And then—who knows? I may have to chase another criminal down in these parts, and what's a detective if he can't do as the Romans do when he's in their territory? So—shake, and call it even!"

So well had the "Bounding Buck" played his part since his first appearance on the scene, that there were many hearty grips of the hand, many a wish for his speedy return, and more than one moist pair of eyes among those who gathered to see him safely on his way with Nash Wildon in charge, bound for the East, where his prisoner was to suffer the penalty due his almost forgotten crime.

"Will I come back? Why, bless your souls, gentle people! I couldn't keep away if I were to try until my horns dropped off! Don't wear poor Little Earthquake out with too constant riding, if you love me! Keep him in clover. Treat him tenderly and with care. For I'm coming back to this benighted region, here to kick up my heels and cavort around like a yearling buck with a new suit of prongs, never to depart from your midst until I've taught every mother's son of you how to ride!"

And before the smiling, yet weeping bride could divine his purpose the Rustler Detective smacked her loudly on the lips!

Then he turned away, leaping into the saddle and rode off with his prisoner.

THE END.

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